

BALTIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE UKRAINE CRISIS: EUROPEANIZATION IN THE SHADOW OF INSECURITY

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Abstract: *This article reviews the policy positions of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania with respect to the Ukraine crisis – the biggest foreign policy challenge for the Baltic states since they regained independence. Ukraine dominated the Baltic foreign policy agenda from the outbreak of the crisis, because it touched upon a dimension of existential threat for the Baltic countries. While giving an overview of the main policy domains where the effect of the Ukraine crisis could be observed, this article demonstrates that the three Baltic countries adopted a comprehensive approach to security and foreign policymaking, underlining cooperation both at a national and European level. In light of this, the Ukraine crisis can be seen as a maturity test for post-independence Baltic foreign policy.*

Key words: *foreign policy; Baltic states; Ukraine; security; European Union*

Introduction

The outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine at the end of November 2013, which led to the annexation of Crimea and military conflict in Donbas, caused disarray and marked a radical change not only in Ukraine but on the international scene in Europe and beyond. These events resonated particularly strongly in the countries sharing geographical and historical proximity to Ukraine and Russia, and these countries were especially alarmed by Russia's aggression. According to some analysts, the three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – were considered “the most likely next potential victims of Russian intervention” (Giles, 2016:47). Given the environment of political and physical instability that emerged in Europe in its wake, the Ukraine crisis could be seen as the biggest foreign policy challenge for the Baltic states since regaining independence. Therefore, this article aims to provide a general, yet comprehensive, overview of the Baltic states' reactions to the Ukraine crisis. It shows that, despite assurances received from international partners – especially from NATO Allies – the Baltic states made sure that they had done everything in their power to sustain international support in this security situation. By maintaining a vigilant foreign policy, the Baltic countries mobilized all of their policy experience from the past 25 years in order to reinforce their international position against a potential threat from Russia.

As will be outlined below, the Baltic states reacted quickly to the Ukraine crisis and not only pursued strong domestic and foreign policies encompassing various policy domains, but they also made extensive use of

the European Union (EU) policy framework and NATO collective defense guarantees. They came to view the EU as a key platform for pursuing relations with Russia. They also came to favor the common European response to Russia, as illustrated by the adoption and continuous extension of sanctions and EU foreign policy discussions. At the same time, all three countries observed with concern the rapprochement of Russia and the West in the case of Syria and in the fight against the Islamic State. Despite the repercussions of international terrorism and the migration crisis that culminated in Europe in 2015-2016, the Baltic states, along with like-minded countries, successfully managed to keep Ukraine high up on the EU agenda.

The article begins by explaining the role and relevance of the Eastern European dimension in Baltic foreign policy prior to the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine—these serve as a basis for understanding the following sections on Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian reactions to the events in Ukraine. More specifically, the article outlines the main domestic and foreign policy messages communicated in and by the Baltic states shortly after the crisis began; it then goes on to review the main policy domains that received heightened attention at the time. These domains include domestic politics, the issue of Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia, the effects of Russia's disinformation campaign, the economy (including the effect of sanctions), and military security. Finally, the article offers some suggestions regarding the evolution of the relationship between the Baltic states and the EU during the Ukraine crisis. It argues that the crisis increased the European dimension in Baltic foreign policy,

which, in turn, may pave the way for a more Europeanized national foreign policy.

Eastern Europe in Baltic foreign policy before the crisis

Integration with the West has been the main foreign policy goal of the Baltic states since the restoration of independence in the beginning of 1990s. With the accession to the EU and NATO in 2004, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania took a significant step towards achieving this aim, and full-scale involvement in international fora gave a new perspective to Baltic policy-makers. When immediate security was perceived as guaranteed through NATO and the EU, the focus of national foreign policy was expanded: it now centered on the EU's Eastern neighborhood and Eastern Partnership initiative¹ (Galbreath et al, 2008; Jakniūnaitė, 2009; Kesa, 2011). The motivation for this was two-fold. First, with their transition experiences fresh in mind, the Baltic states argued that, among EU countries, they had special expertise both in supporting other post-Soviet countries with the tearing down of the remnants of the Soviet legacy in their political and economic systems, and in offering these states assistance with achieving full democracy and market economy. The Baltic transformation was perceived as an undeniable success story, wherein the former targets of democracy promotion and beneficiaries of development aid became the advocates and donors for those countries next in line. Second, this enabled the Baltic states to edge closer to EU decision-making processes and to

¹ Eastern Partnership (established in 2009) is an EU policy aimed at engaging with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

influence the EU's relations with its neighborhood – including Russia – in correspondence with their interests.

In the years before the Ukraine crisis, the Eastern Partnership maintained its lead position in the foreign policy of the Baltic states (Kasekamp, 2013; Vilpišauskas, 2013). For example, all six countries were considered to be development cooperation priorities (with particular focus on Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine), and the Eastern Partnership was one of the key issues for the Lithuanian and Latvian EU Presidencies in the second half of 2013 and first half of 2015, respectively. The Baltic states supported giving Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine a long-term prospective path to EU membership, while also fully realizing the enlargement fatigue, economic crisis, and other more pressing issues prevailing in the EU.

Regarding another central dimension of Baltic foreign policy after EU and NATO accession (i.e., Russia), there were few signs of progress for various reasons, despite some attempts at normalizing relations. Bilateral trade relations with Russia may have been on the rise for most of the 2000s, but past legacies and mutual distrust, combined with Russia's resistance to the Baltic states' EU and NATO accession on the one hand, and Baltic observations about domestic political developments in Russia on the other hand, loomed over the relations. Antagonistic historical truths about World War II were amplified by Russia's renewed compatriot policy and the Bronze Soldier crisis in Estonia (see Berg & Ehin, 2009). As well, concerns regarding the insufficiently integrated Russian-speaking

minorities in Estonia and Latvia² shaped both the (lack of) contact between interethnic groups in these countries and Baltic-Russian bilateral relations.

The broader security dilemmas in the Baltic region were augmented rather than diminished with EU and NATO enlargement (Lašas & Galbreath, 2013). For example, despite extensive EU-facilitated cross-border cooperation, border issues on the political level took a long time to move forward. Of the three countries, only Lithuania had a ratified border with Russia (completed in 1992) before EU accession. The Latvian-Russian border treaty was finalized in 2007, whereas Estonia and Russia signed the treaty in 2014 and have kept it shelved since. NATO did not bring immediate changes on the ground in the Baltic region; for example, there was no detailed NATO regional defense plan until the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, despite constant Baltic pressure. The temporary rapprochement in US-Russia relations that resulted from Obama's reset policy made the Baltic states anxious. From their perspective, joint defense projects between NATO and Russia were "naïve and misguided" (Lašas & Galbreath, 2013:155).

With this legacy of national experience, the Baltic states struggled to influence EU's Russia policy, as some EU institutions and member states saw the Baltic states as "unhealthily focused" on Russia (Kuus 2011: 279). Ever since the Bronze Soldier crisis and subsequent cyberattacks in Estonia (2007), the Russian-Georgian War (2008), various trade disputes between Russia and the Baltic states (food exports, energy), and Russian-Ukrainian gas disputes (e.g. 2006, 2009, 2014), the political efforts of the Baltic states

² See the section on Russian-speaking minorities below.

mainly focused on maintaining relations with Russia on a very pragmatic level.

The Baltic states and the crisis in Ukraine

The Baltic states perceived the events of the Ukraine crisis as a confirmation of their previous foreign policy choices regarding Russia. Baltic decisionmakers felt that they had been signaling to the EU – and the entire West, for that matter – to be more cautious regarding the developments in its Eastern neighborhood for a long time, or at least since the war in Georgia in 2008. Ukraine was a “wake up call” for Europe, while the Baltic states had “said so” all along. It was the wider international community that had “kept pressing the snooze button... to postpone awakening” (Ilves, 2014a). The annexation of Crimea, subsequent military conflict, and the inability of the West to influence the situation came as a shock to many in Europe and realized the worst fears of Baltic decisionmakers. The Ukraine crisis was seen as a collapse of the European security system: a war, in which Russia sought to “redraw the post-[WWII] war map of Europe” (Dalia Grybauskaitė, in Easton, 2014). This was reflected in the statements of many Baltic political figures. Toomas Hendrik Ilves, President of Estonia at the time, saw the Ukraine crisis as a “conflict of values” and a “battle between Europe and non-Europe” (Ilves, 2014b). Dalia Grybauskaitė, President of Lithuania and one of the staunchest critics of Russia, caused strong diplomatic and political reactions by calling Russia “a terrorist state” (Weymouth, 2014) and warning of a “prelude to [a] ‘New Cold War’” (BBC, 2014b). Edgars Rinkēvičs, Foreign Minister of Latvia,

referred to Russia as “a revisionist super-power prepared to use military force to satisfy its ambitions” (LSM, 2016a), while also referring to its actions as “a return to 19[th]-century politics” (Gotev, 2015).

The Baltic states have continued to be outspoken supporters of Ukrainian sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. They refused to recognize the results of the contentious referendum and the subsequent annexation of Crimea, insisting on the violation of the principles of international law. The Baltic reactions did not stay at the rhetorical level and were observable in various dimensions. At the outbreak of the crisis, the political support of the Baltic states concentrated on the Ukrainian opposition. A number of high-ranking officials visited Kyiv at the time of the protests, and the Baltic states officially recognized the new government led by Arseniy Yatsenyuk. Baltic assistance to Ukraine included providing financial aid, project support, expertise on conducting reforms, and government-provided humanitarian aid; this was complemented by strong engagement from civil society organizations in all three countries, and especially in Lithuania. A number of rallies and protests against Russia’s actions took place in Vilnius. Lithuania was also the only one out of the three countries to agree to send military aid to Ukraine.

At the same time, genuine Baltic support for Ukraine must be seen in the context of their own security. The fact that analogous arguments used by Russia during the annexation of Crimea could also be applied to the Baltic states, coupled with Russia’s readiness to use military force while blurring the boundaries of international law, made the threat appear more realistic than ever. As summed up by the security policy adviser to the

President of Estonia, “the scope of the crisis extends beyond Ukraine to the security of the Baltic region itself” (Maigre, 2015:17). Thus, in addition to the fact that Ukraine was a foreign policy priority, the crisis had an existential dimension for the Baltic states. Since many policy positions of the Baltic states overlapped, they will be considered here in bulk, with attention to differences in individual approaches. Unsurprisingly, security emerged as a very strong trend in the official discourses of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Taking into account the fact that the Baltic interpretation of national security is broad and comprehensive, the analysis below will focus on a select number of soft and hard security aspects. In what follows, the main Baltic political discourses pertaining to the Ukraine crisis and Russia, both at the domestic and international level, will be discussed: Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic region, Russian disinformation campaigns, the effect of sanctions (both the EU and Russian counter-sanctions), and military security. The dimensions have been chosen because they have often been considered as vulnerabilities in the case of a potential threat to the Baltic region.

Foreign and domestic policy discourses

Upon the outbreak of the crisis, the Baltic countries mobilized in support of Ukraine, as is evident from the fact that Ukraine clearly emerged as the single most prevalent topic in both the bi- and multilateral foreign relations of all three states. The Ukraine crisis could be considered the biggest foreign policy challenge for the Baltic states since regaining independence: it put to test all previous policy choices, from EU and NATO accession to a cautious Russia-policy, and from participation at

international military operations and peacekeeping missions to domestic social and economic policies.

The events in Ukraine overshadowed the Baltic states' national foreign policy priority of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) both on the EU and national level. The failure of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius in November 2013 – where the then President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich withdrew from signing the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU, contrary to domestic and European expectations – was a clear disappointment to the Baltic states. This was also revealed by their critique of the policy, which called for the EU to be “more strategic, resolute and united with regard to the Eastern Partnership” (MFA of Lithuania, 2013), as well as for the modernization of the EaP (ERR, 2013; MFA of Latvia, 2014a). As most of the limited EU attention was directed at Ukraine, the Baltic states understood the need to uphold close contacts with other EaP countries, as well. The Latvian Presidency, for which EaP was also a Presidency priority, made efforts to keep Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus engaged with the EU in light of the Association Agreements with Georgia and Moldova. In the face of the Riga summit in May 2015 and concurring events in the EU and Ukraine, the future of the EaP was already appearing bleak. Even the Latvian presidency saw this as “a survival summit” (Gotev, 2015), posing a question of “to be or not to be” for the policy in the future (MFA of Latvia, 2015).

Two very clear and contradictory messages could be distinguished in the official Baltic discourses regarding their own countries. First and foremost, all three governments kept reassuring their domestic audiences

on the topic of national security, insisting that what happened in Ukraine could not happen in the Baltic states due to the latter's NATO and EU membership. For example, President Ilves of Estonia dismissed in a straightforward manner the possibility that Russia's actions in Ukraine could be repeated in the Baltic region, saying such actions would be "a very foolish thing [for Russia] to do" (The Guardian, 2014a). However, in reality, there were grave concerns among the Baltic politicians about the threat of a potential military confrontation. This leads to the second message: while domestic audiences were being convinced of NATO security guarantees, the policymakers started to pressure (openly, as well as behind closed doors) the Allies for increased military presence in the Baltic states. Above all, this was aimed at the United States as a strategic partner. For example, Estonia announced that security issues were most important in Estonia's relations with the US (MFA of Estonia, 2014); Latvia emphasized the strong Euro-Atlantic orientation and "harmonizing the security and defense interests of the EU and NATO" (MFA of Latvia, 2014c; 2014d); while Lithuania's President explicitly urged NATO to deploy troops in the Baltic region, to avoid repeating a "Crimea-style scenario" in Lithuania (The Moscow Times, 2014). In response to this, President Obama's visit to Tallinn in the beginning of September 2014 was a visible reassurance from the US that paved the way for intense negotiations between Baltic and US officials regarding defense cooperation.

At the same time, while the Baltic publics were putting pressure on NATO, several incidents directly involving Russia took place, further exacerbating the uneasiness of the situation. Shortly after Obama's visit to

Tallinn, Estonian Internal Security Service (*KaPo*) officer Eston Kohver was detained by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) on the Estonian-Russian border and was later sentenced to 15 years in prison for espionage and related charges. Although the Estonian state institutions handled the case professionally and Kohver was later traded for former *KaPo* officer Aleksei Dressen, convicted of espionage in Estonia, it took a year until Kohver was released, during which the incident caught widespread domestic and international attention. This was not an isolated incident: in a spy scandal in Lithuania in May 2015, Russian citizen Nikolai Filipchenko was detained and sentenced to 10 years in prison (Delfi, 2017). On a more bizarre note, Russia caught some attention in the media by opening two Baltic-related cases for legal review. One concerned the Soviet recognition of the Baltic states' independence in 1991—a case initiated by the Prosecutor General's Office (which had previously ruled the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 illegal) due to the alleged argument that the decision may have been illegal (BBC, 2015). Another case concerned reopening investigations against Lithuanian conscripts who had refused to serve in the Soviet army after Lithuania had declared independence in 1990; these conscripts were therefore now facing criminal charges from Russia (Delfi, 2014). As was aptly summarized by Marko Mihkelson, the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Estonian Parliament at the time, the Baltic states "...have been dealing with difficult issues with Russia for years" (The Guardian, 2014b), implying that there was nothing new about the incidents.

Overall political support to Baltic governments remained high in the context of heightened economic and security concerns. Due to events in Ukraine, the trend of downplaying the domestic impact other international issues of – such as the European debt crisis or the influx of refugees to the EU – was observable, especially during the election periods. This, in turn, can provide an explanation for the sharp reactions of Baltic publics to the refugee quotas proposed on the EU level: the concerns about existing and potential new minorities – as well as their prospects for integration – were already amplified. In the case of Estonia, there was a general consensus among the public, as well as among the majority of political parties, regarding Russia's actions in Ukraine, and the debate therefore focused more on the possible courses of action rather than on the threat perception. However, there were significant gaps between the levels of support from Estonian- and Russian-speakers for political parties. This led *Keskerakond* – the main opposition party at the time, which has also often been considered pro-Russian – to collect the votes of Russian-speakers and thereby lose votes from the Estonian-speaking population. In the Latvian parliamentary elections of 2014, security concerns were more central, since the opposition party *Harmony*, enjoying the biggest support from ethnic Russians, openly refused to condemn the annexation of Crimea (The Guardian, 2014c). In 2015, Raimonds Vējonis, a vehement NATO supporter and a critic of Russia, was elected President of Latvia. However, despite strong criticism towards Russia regarding its actions in Ukraine, Latvia followed quite a pragmatic foreign policy, prompted by extensive business ties and economic dependence between Latvia and Russia (Potjomkina & Vizgunova, 2014). In Lithuania, it was resolute rhetoric towards Russia and

messages focused on national security that played a significant part in the campaign that brought Grybauskaitė – dubbed the “Iron Lady” – her second term in office (BBC, 2014a). In the local elections in Lithuania in 2015, changes in the political landscape, such as the local Polish minority party with pro-Kremlin reputation joining forces with the ethnic Russian representatives and gaining new mandates in several municipalities (Tracevskis, 2015), were seen as preparation for the parliamentary elections of 2016.

Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic region

After the “little green men scenario” in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, it became rather common in the West to ask if Narva or Latgale – i.e., the overwhelmingly Russian-populated areas in Estonia and Latvia – could be next in line. Concerns about Russian-speaking populations in the three countries³ were grave because, resorting to oversimplification, Russia’s arguments for its presence in Ukraine included defending the rights of Russian-speakers abroad and responding to favorable public opinion regarding closer ties to Russia among the local population—all of which were also seen as potentially applicable in the Baltic cases. Russia’s policies regarding its Baltic diaspora have strained bilateral relations ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the issue was increasingly politicized after the Baltic states gained EU membership. Russia has since referred to human rights violations due to the large

³ The number of ethnic Russians in Estonia is approx. 24.8% of the population, in Latvia approx. 26.2% and in Lithuania approx. 5.8%, however, other minorities increase the number of Russian-speakers to roughly 30% of the population in Estonia, 42% in Latvia, and about 12% in Lithuania (Estonian Population and Housing Census, 2011; McGuinness, 2014; Lithuanian Population and Housing Census, 2011).

number of Russian-speaking non-citizens in Estonia and Latvia, the refusal of the two countries to recognize Russian as an official language, and the reduction of the number of Russian schools. Estonia and Latvia, on the other hand, have emphasized the opportunities to obtain citizenship via naturalization and the necessity of learning the official language in order to adapt to the society in general.⁴

Although a lengthier analysis is not possible in the framework of this article, it must be pointed out that, while the spectrum of attitudes among Baltic Russian-speakers was wide⁵, there was reason for concern, since the majority often lived in separate communities and continued to receive information through Russian TV channels—meaning, their worldview was being shaped by official Russian discourses. The Russian compatriot policy was designed for Baltic Russian-speakers to maintain close ties with the Motherland via various cultural and political means, and this, in turn, inevitably undermined the Baltic governments' progress in facilitating the building of social cohesion. At the same time, the majority of Baltic Russian-speakers in all three countries held, in general, favorable attitudes towards their respective countries of residence and its state institutions. Despite the shortcomings in the ethnic integration process, the Crimea scenario was considered unlikely in the case of the Baltic region,

⁴ The multi-faceted issue of Russian-speaking minorities has been analyzed extensively, with ample data available. See, for example, the Monitoring of Integration in Estonian Society and other analyses at the Institute of Baltic Studies' website: <https://www.ibs.ee/en/publications/social-cohesion/>; and analyses on the Latvian Centre for Human Rights' website: <http://cilvektiesibas.org.lv/en/social-integration/>.

⁵ In the analysis of Monitoring of Integration in Estonian Society (2011), different groups of Russian-speakers are identified, based on their likelihood of level of integration into the Estonian society: successfully integrated, Russian speaking patriot of Estonia, Estonian-speaking active and critical, Little integrated, Unintegrated passive.

not only because of NATO membership, but also because of higher living standards, social security, and other advantages (including travel and employment opportunities) stemming from EU member-state status (Kasekamp, 2016). As attention to the level of integration of Russian-speakers resurfaced (not least due to the Russian disinformation campaign), Baltic politicians mainly sought to address some of the concerns with several short- and long-term measures ranging from providing more language courses to creating alternative channels of information, as will be discussed below.

Russian disinformation campaign

The disinformation campaign launched by Russia during the Ukraine crisis in Europe was the largest since Soviet times. The campaign had many targets, including general publics in the West, like-minded (anti-systemic) groups all over the world, Russian domestic audiences, and the (Russian-speaking) communities in Russia's "near abroad" (Wilson, 2015). There were a number of Russian media platforms such as internet portals, TV stations (PBK, RTR, NTV Mir, etc.), print media outlets, etc., available in the Baltic states. Aside from TV channels, the new Russian media outlet Sputnik – an online news platform and radio station in more than 30 languages, including many official EU languages – also opened its website in Latvian (first in 2014, later shut down and reopened), in Lithuanian (2015) and in Estonian (2016). Russian-speaking minorities and other groups located solely in the Russian information space in the Baltic region were therefore a direct target group for the campaign. In the early phases of the Ukraine conflict, Baltic governments were already seeking to adopt several

countermeasures to this campaign, on both the national and the EU level. Latvia and Lithuania opted for legal measures such as fining and/or banning Russian media providers for short periods, having accused them of “inciting hatred”. This led to the shutdown of Sputnik by the Latvian authorities in March 2016, after an investigation established a “clear link” between Sputnik and Dmitry Kiselev, the Director of Russia’s RT media empire who was facing targeted EU sanctions after Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea. Although the issue was considered controversial, Latvian Foreign Minister Rinkēvičs called upon other EU member-states to follow suit (LSM, 2016b). Estonia chose not to ban the Russian media: instead, as a more substantial move, a Russian-language TV channel was launched in September 2015, in an attempt to engage the local Russian-speaking community and provide an “adequate picture of Estonian society” (ERR, 2015). The decision was disputed, since the channel had to compete with already existing media platforms while having a very limited budget. According to public surveys, however, the channel managed to establish itself with permanent viewership, albeit small⁶.

The Baltic states also took initiative on the EU level. Estonia and Lithuania belonged to a four-member group (along with Denmark and the UK) that sent a non-paper to EU High Representative/ Vice President Federica Mogherini in January 2015, lobbying for an EU response to the Russian disinformation campaign. The undersigned called for a response consisting of four aspects: raising public awareness about disinformation and the proper response to it (e.g., by establishing a web platform for

⁶ The channel had a steady daily share at 0.5% in spring 2016 which amounts to approx. 200,000 viewers per week, more than half of these were Estonian-speakers (TNS Emor, 2016).

deconstructing disinformation); taking an assertive or proactive approach to increasing EU visibility both by preparing a strategic communication Action Plan and providing alternative sources of information to Russian-speakers, and by supporting independent international and national media platforms in Russian language; ensuring accountability among media providers regarding any violations of rules of broadcasting and public information in the EU (EU Strategic Communication..., 2015). As a result, the East StratCom Task Force⁷ was established in April 2015 under the European External Action Service (EEAS) and was composed of nine representatives from various member states, including, among others, an Estonian and a Latvian. The central functions of the Task Force were to explain EU policies to the audiences in EaP countries by communicating key policy areas, providing *ad hoc* information about topical issues, myth-busting, and supporting the EU in strengthening the media in its Eastern neighborhood. Although the Baltic states lobbied for a cross-European TV channel, there was not enough political interest and will among the member states to pursue this (LSM, 2015). In another initiative, Latvia pressured for a stronger European stance by leading the review of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) during its EU Presidency. In the autumn of 2015, Latvia disseminated a “green card” proposal for the revision of the directive regarding the regulation of hate speech, with the aim of checking Russian media channels registered in other EU countries but broadcasting in the Baltic states. It argued that the EU is “increasingly witnessing a worrying trend of mass media becoming a powerful tool for spreading hate speech, intolerance and propaganda,” and this should not

⁷ For more information on the Task Force, see EEAS website: <http://bit.ly/1Snzome>

be disregarded during the review process (Saeima of the Republic of Latvia, 2015a). The debates on this have continued into 2017.

Baltic economies during the first years of sanctions

The EU first imposed economic sanctions against Russia in July 2014, targeting sectoral cooperation and exchanges with Russia. The Baltic economies were affected both by EU sanctions aimed at Russia and Russian counter sanctions on Baltic meat, dairy, and vegetable products, although more precise impact has remained debatable. Despite the effect of sanctions on these economies, which were demonstrating slow economic growth anyway, all Baltic states strongly favored EU sanctions against Russia, as well as their repeated extensions until the Minsk agreements would be fully enforced. Politicians in all three countries generally supported sanctions against Russia, with more vocal exceptions from Latvia. For example, the leader of pro-Russian *Harmony* called the attempt to use trade sanctions against Russia to stop the aggression in Ukraine a “nightmarish idea” (LSM, 2014), and Andris Bērziņš, President of Latvia at the time, stressed the need for a more pragmatic approach that would maintain balanced and neighborly ties (Eglitis & Langley, 2015). Public opinion in the Baltic states was supportive of sanctions, and the sanctions’ effects – as far as there were any on the level of everyday life – were considered an inevitability.

At the time the sanctions were passed, the main trading partners of the Baltic states were their closest neighbors, with more trade moving in the EU direction than in the Russian direction (Zvaigzne, 2015). However, Baltic businesses with markets in Russia struggled, as reorientation to new

markets was complicated, especially given the economic situation and the absence of compensations for the sanctions' effects. As the Baltic states had suffered from Russia's import bans on several occasions before the crisis in Ukraine, some businesses had already adapted their markets and moved away from Russia, in search of new and more predictable trading partners. Nevertheless, compared with other EU member-states, the Baltic states were clearly harder hit by the Russian sanctions; the direct effect on the export of goods varied in 2013 from 2.6% of GDP in Lithuania, 0.4% in Estonia, and 0.3% in Latvia (Oja, 2015). Of the three countries, Lithuania suffered most from the sanctions. While 21.6% of all Lithuanian exports went to Russia (the second biggest export partner) in 2014, the share had fallen to 13.7% in 2015 and 13.5% in 2016, even though Russia remained their biggest export partner (Statistics Lithuania, 2017). For Latvia, Russia remained the third biggest export partner, despite significant decrease due to the sanctions: total exports were at 10.71% in 2014, 8.07% in 2015, and 7.62% in 2016 (Statistics Latvia, 2017). In the case of Estonia in 2014, Russia was the 4th biggest trading partner with 10% of all exports; by 2015, Russia's share in foreign trade exports had fallen to 7% and maintained this position in 2016 (Statistics Estonia, 2017). At the same time, it must be emphasized that the Baltic export of agricultural products to Russia dropped not only due to the sanctions but also as a result of the decrease of exports not covered by the embargo, which were the result of unstable market conditions, the decrease of demand in Russia due to low value of the ruble, and the economic crisis (Szczepanski, 2015:7).

Military security and defense cooperation

Compared to the areas discussed above, as well as to the situation before the Ukraine crisis, changes in terms of military security in the Baltic states were the most explicit. In a clear response to Russia's actions in Crimea, as well as its military build-up and provocations in the Baltic Sea region, the defense expenses in the Baltic region skyrocketed, NATO military presence increased, bilateral and multilateral defense cooperation soared, and numerous local and regional military exercises and trainings were carried out. All three capitals were established as hosts of a NATO Centre of Excellence (COE) – Cooperative Cyber Defence COE in Tallinn (established in 2008), Strategic Communication COE in Riga (2015), and NATO Energy Security COE in Vilnius (2012).

Before the Ukraine crisis, Estonia was the only Baltic country and one of only four NATO members (along with the US, the UK and Greece) to meet the NATO defense spending requirement of 2% of GDP for member states. In 2016, the Estonian defense budget already exceeded the threshold, reaching 2.07% (MOD of Estonia, 2015c). As a result of the Ukraine crisis, Latvia and Lithuania also set out to achieve the 2% threshold. Latvia started from as low as 0.90% of GDP in 2012, and the budget was increased significantly to 1.02% (2015) and 1.41% (2016) (Sargs.lv, 2016). Lithuania's budget was at 0.77% (2013), but a sharp increase to 1.15% (2015) and 1.48% (2016) of GDP was subsequently achieved (Delfi, 2015). The largest share of defense expenses was spent on the development of capabilities and special projects.

In addition to increasing the defense budget, Lithuania also reinstated conscription (abolished in 2008), leaving Latvia as the only one

of the three Baltic states with professional armed forces. All three countries reformed both their military structures and legislation. In Estonia, a new National Defense Act was adopted (enforced on 1 January 2016), wherein peace- and wartime defense regulations, as well as international military co-operation, were merged into one, to specify and facilitate decisionmaking processes, organize mobilization, and reserve service (Riigi Teataja, 2016). Lithuania conducted several reforms regarding the structure of their intelligence and counter-intelligence systems (Lithuanian State Security Department, 2015). Along with Poland and Ukraine, Lithuania signed an agreement to launch a joint brigade, LITPOLUKRBRIG. Latvia adopted a new Law on National Security that requires the President to request help from NATO in case of a military attack (Sargs.lv, 2014). The new National Security Concept, adopted in 2015, outlined priorities in eight threat areas and analyzed the changed international security environment as a result of the crisis in Ukraine (Saeima of the Republic of Latvia 2015b).

Increased Russian maritime and airspace activity in the Baltic Sea region, as well as recurring violations of Baltic airspace, led to an increase in NATO air policing missions (although later cut) and the creation of a second Baltic air base (in addition to Šiauliai, Lithuania) established at Ämari, Estonia. Deterrence measures agreed upon at the 2014 NATO Wales summit were welcomed by the Baltic states as positive developments. However, Baltic governments continued negotiations with Allied states to establish permanent troop presence in the former, and, at the NATO Warsaw Summit in 2016, the Alliance took on the obligation of deploying battalions to all three Baltic countries, as well as Poland. The Baltic states

also sought to increase regional cooperation with Nordic countries through arrangements such as the Danish-Baltic bilateral defense agreements, which focused on joint training and exercises (see, e.g. Embassy of Denmark in Estonia 2015).

According to public opinion surveys conducted at the height of the crisis in Ukraine, attention to security rose among the citizens of all three Baltic countries. For example, defense willingness among Estonian citizens was at a record high in spring 2015 (85%) (MOD of Estonia, 2015a), while the same statistic was 41.7% in Latvia in autumn 2015 (SKDS, 2015: 39). While no comparable data was found on defense willingness in Lithuania, public approval regarding NATO and increasing the defense budget was relatively high in 2015 (56% and 47%, respectively) (MOD of Lithuania, 2016). Similar sentiments were also reflected in the fact that interest in joining volunteer defense formations (*Kaitseliit* in Estonia, *Zemessardze* in Latvia, and *KASP* in Lithuania) spiked in all three countries.

Throughout the polls, a sharp gap in perceptions can be observed along ethnic lines. For example, in Estonia, 46% of Estonian-speakers and 11% of non-Estonian (i.e. Russian-) speakers were proud of NATO membership in 2015; further, the confidence of Estonians in Defense Forces was 91%, compared to 51% of non-Estonians. When it came to “Russian activities in restoring its authority”, 7% of non-Estonian speakers and 53% of Estonian-speakers saw this as a threat (MOD of Estonia, 2015b). In Latvia, 81% of Latvian-speakers and 59% of Russian-speakers expressed concern about the military security of Latvia, and 48.5% of Latvian-speakers and 27.8% of Russian-speakers were willing to defend their

country militarily in 2015, while 32.7% could not answer the question at all. Russian-speakers' trust in NATO in 2015 was 23.5%, whereas the figure for Latvian-speakers was 59.8%. (SKDS 2015: 44).

The issues discussed above effectively demonstrate the complex interdependence across various policy fields on which the Ukraine crisis touched—many of these fields had both a domestic as well as a foreign policy dimension. The support of the Baltic public and elites for Ukraine was firm and, in most cases, there was little political debate on the matter. Russian-speaking minorities and integration challenges in the Baltic region returned to the center of attention due to the extensive Russian disinformation campaign. Although the effect of economic sanctions on the Baltic economies was relatively low, it still influenced businesses, which were operating in an environment of slow economic growth. Security and defense issues resurfaced sharply and were addressed more intensely than ever before. Although bilateral relations with EaP countries could not compensate for decreased EU attention to its neighbors, the Ukraine crisis also managed to keep Eastern Europe on the agenda. How did these issues play out at the European level? In many ways, the Baltic states combined domestic- and European-level strategies during the crisis, in search of the best policy responses.

Baltic states and the EU: Uploading and complementing preferences

Looking back at the development of policy positions between the Baltic states and the EU since the accession of the former to the latter, the Baltic states have been supportive of further EU expansion, of the EU speaking

with “one voice”, and, on several occasions, of favoring a community approach over a bilateral one (Galbreath et al, 2008:125; Made, 2011:69; Kasekamp, 2013:103-105). During the accession process and the early years of EU membership, the relationship between the Baltic states and the EU was clearly more about downloading EU policies rather than uploading their own preferences to the EU level. As all three countries saw NATO as the main security provider, the “dilemma of dual loyalty” (Budrytė, 2005) influenced their foreign policy, which relied on “hard” security provided by the transatlantic cooperation and NATO, as well as relying on the broader economic, societal, and even military security (in terms of CSDP) provided by EU policies (Galbreath & Lamoreaux, 2013:115). With an active role in the Eastern Partnership and other policies, the Baltic states could also channel their own foreign policy preferences to the EU and expand their foreign policy networks through the platform provided by the EU. It is therefore not unusual that the position of the Baltic states with respect to the crisis in Ukraine converged with the overall EU policy, but diverged from it when it came to the degree of the EU’s response.

The Baltic states were generally satisfied with the EU’s ability to achieve a common position with respect to both Russia and Ukraine, with the adoption and extension of targeted sanctions, and the prompt and encouraging reaction to finalizing the Association Agreement with Ukraine in 2014. However, many politicians in the Baltic states were nevertheless disappointed with the EU, claiming that, whatever actions the EU agreed on, they came too little and too late. For example, President Ilves of Estonia declared that the EU was “sitting and watching” while Russia

annexed Crimea, and that the EU blacklist of Russian officials was “a minor slap on the wrist” (Pop, 2014). The degree of EU sanctions imposed on Russia came to meet the Baltic expectations only in the second and third round of adoption (Vilson, 2015). With respect to security and defense, all three states clearly based their emphasis not on the Common Security and Defense Policy but on transatlantic relations and NATO. This policy choice reflected, firstly, an understanding of the limits of the EU when it came to hard security. Although the Baltic states favored strengthening EU defense capabilities in the field of cyberattacks, hybrid warfare, strategic communication, and energy security, the overwhelming consensus was that a joint EU army would overlap with NATO and serve only to weaken it in the contemporary security situation (Potjomkina, 2015). At the same time, this was indicative of the Baltic states privileging relations with the US, which all three countries regard as the main security provider in the region.

In all three countries, the relevance of the EU as a platform for interactions with and about Ukraine increased in comparison to the time before the crisis. It is interesting to examine these tendencies further and discuss their potential significance. The EU foreign policy strategy towards Ukraine was utilized considerably in national foreign policymaking. At the same time, a strong, bilateral, Baltic foreign policy existed side by side with the EU’s policy. When comparing the three countries’ use of the EU platform and policy in their national foreign policymaking, the country whose positions were most in line with the EU was Latvia. On the one hand, officials and decisionmakers of Latvia advocated stronger EU engagement in the transformation of Ukraine and in relations with Russia

(MFA of Latvia, 2014b); on the other hand, Latvian officials also sought to maintain pragmatic cooperation with Russia. Despite the fact that the Russian threat was discernibly felt in all three countries, Latvia's deep ties to Russia led to this threat being less vocalized in the former's foreign policy discourse (Bērziņa, 2015). The EU's foreign policy thus aligned well with Latvian preferences. While the EU was an important foreign policy platform also for both Estonia and Lithuania, the former placed a slightly stronger and more resolute emphasis on the security issues and, therefore, on bilateral relations with the US. Lithuania, which held the EU Presidency right before the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine, demonstrated its recently mastered negotiation and lobbying skills in EU structures, while simultaneously burning a lot of credit earned during the Presidency in order to push for a stronger EU response regarding Ukraine (Wilson, 2015). Additionally, Lithuania made extensive use of other multilateral platforms to further its policy preferences, as it was a member of the UN Security Council and very active in the OSCE and the Council of Europe at the time. With the combination of various bi- and multilateral foreign policy avenues and an outspoken President, Lithuania clearly emerged as a leader among the Baltic states both in and outside the EU. Perhaps the biggest struggles for the Baltic states during the second and third year of the crisis focused more on keeping Ukraine high on the EU agenda, in light of international terrorism and the refugee crisis, which both somewhat began to overshadow the recent Russian aggression. The Baltic states continued to advocate for greater EU engagement in the Eastern neighborhood, including an ambitious neighborhood policy and further EU enlargement.

As regards policy towards Russia, the Baltic states remained among the more critical and cautious member-states in the EU during the second and third year of the Ukraine crisis. The development of the confrontation in Ukraine solidified a long-term crisis in Baltic-Russian relations. The political dialogue with Russia focused only on very pragmatic issues, such as cross-border cooperation, trade, or cultural diplomacy. The confrontation continued in the military domain, as measures adopted by NATO to increase deterrence in the Baltic states offered reassurances to its Allies but were interpreted by Russia as a military build-up on its borders and a signal for a possible long-term standoff in Western-Russian relations. At the same time, the security of the Baltic region did not exist in a vacuum, and it was significantly influenced by the developments in the international arena.

By way of conclusion

This overview of the development of the Baltic policy positions during the first years of the Ukraine crisis has highlighted several crucial elements in their national foreign policy. First of all, as an Eastern Partnership country, Ukraine already had been a priority for the Baltic states before the outbreak of the crisis in 2013. The Baltic states emphasized an ambitious EU approach towards the Eastern neighborhood and were guided by this principle also on the national level. As such, providing support and assistance to Ukraine to ensure a democratic transition was a major task for foreign policymaking on the national level after the regime change in 2014.

Secondly, and more importantly, the crisis in Ukraine was not only about Ukraine. For the Baltic states, it rapidly escalated the concerns about their own security, as Russian aggression highlighted several weak spots in the security environment and domestic political situation in several Central and Eastern European countries. As the article describes, there were several crucial differences between Ukraine and the Baltic states that did not allow the Ukrainian situation to be easily compared to the situation in the Baltic region; to many, the Crimea scenario was not seen as applicable to the Baltic states. However, the crisis did alarm Baltic decisionmakers and accentuate the weaknesses of the Baltic states, whether they be shortcomings in the integration of local Russian-speaking minorities, energy reliance on Russia, trade and business dependencies, or the need to invest more in defense. This, in turn, could be seen as a testament to the prudent choice of the Baltic states to focus on a comprehensive approach to security.

Thirdly, implications of the Ukraine crisis were also interpreted at the regional and international level. The primary discourse in the Baltic states emphasized the collapse of the post-Cold War international security system as a result of Russian aggression. The vague situation wherein, despite this breach of international law, the territorial integrity of a sovereign country could not be restored, opened up a Pandora's Box for similar ventures in the future. On the regional level, this spurred extended cooperation between Nordic and Baltic countries, with and without the NATO dimension. On the international level, this raised debate over NATO's Article 5 and the collective defense clause in any NATO member-state

territory. Should NATO be unable to initiate Art. 5 in case of a military attack against one of its members, this would render the alliance defunct. This is relevant also in the context of debates around the development of EU defense capabilities. The relations between the EU and its Baltic member-states in light of the Ukraine crisis demonstrates the importance of the EU for the Baltic region. Despite the fact that the expectations of the three Baltic countries surpassed the deliverables of the EU, the former successfully managed to upload their foreign policy concerns to the EU level and extensively downloaded EU policies (EaP in particular) and positions towards the Eastern neighborhood to their national foreign policies. This relationship shows that, in the case of a key foreign policy issue, the EU dimension grew and became more important than simply serving as another avenue for pursuing national foreign policy.

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