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Russia and the Baltic States after Regaining Independence

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1. Introduction

In 1993 and 1994, Soviet/Russian troops withdrew from the three Baltic States, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, without, however, disappearing from their lives; Russia stayed on in their collective memories, their security preoccupations, and their foreign and national security policy considerations. There were still many issues to resolve and relationships to build, and as it transpired, this was difficult to achieve. The shaky relations that had prevailed over the years between the Baltic States and Russia became colder and more distant as Russia's assertiveness and ambitions intensified both in the region and globally.

Although during the Soviet period all Soviet Socialist Republics enjoyed equal legal status in the Soviet Union, in reality the status of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia differed substantially: Russia was the most important republic, its political elite dominated the governmental structures, and its language was de facto the official language of the whole state.[1] The three republics on the shore of the Baltic Sea, the western periphery of the country, were small, 'nationalistic' republics that became part of the state after the occupation in 1940. In the final years of the Soviet Union they became the republics most eager and impatient to leave the USSR.

The collapse of Soviet Union enlarged and accentuated their differences. Russia was considered the successor state, inheriting its loans, its nuclear weapons and the entire material and symbolic legacy of the USSR. Meanwhile, the three Baltic States re-established their independence, trying to build their institutions and democratic political culture anew and rid themselves of the Soviet past as much and quickly as possible.

This article reviews and analyses the role and place of Russia in the Baltic States during the 25 years since Soviet/Russian troops left the countries – Lithuania in 1993 and Estonia and Latvia in 1994. It shows how their foreign and domestic policies have been motivated and driven by a profound fear of Russia, and how their interpretations of the Russian threat, connected to the perception of their painful past (both in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union), consequently

1 Officially, however, in each republic both the language of the republic and Russian were official languages.

influence their over-sensitive approach towards any hostile action taken by Russia. The article takes a chronological view and identifies the most relevant issues that have defined the relations. It does not intend to cover and evaluate all problems and events encountered by Russia and the Baltic States, the goal being to indicate the key points that have substantially contributed towards the sceptical, cautious and vigilant stance towards Russia.[2]

The three Baltic States differ in a variety of ways in terms of their political systems, social conditions, and even economic models. Some differences towards Russia have also been emerging among them over the years, mostly in terms of policy choices or some unique contentious issues with Russia. We will make some comments where the differences matter. However, most frequently, even when the examples provided are only from one state, general attitudes towards Russia by the Baltic States and vice versa have been similar.

2. The bumpy road from the beginning to the end

In order to make the already long history of Baltic-Russian relations more comprehensible, we divide the span of almost thirty years into three periods. The first ten years (1994–2004) were the period when the Baltic States were preparing for integration into the EU and NATO, the second period (2004–2014) developed in the new post-integration environment and ended with the Russian occupation of Crimea. The seven years since 2014 have been years of confrontation between Russia and the West. This period has validated the sceptical and cautious attitude of the Baltic States towards Russia, a view which European states had previously considered an oddity but which has now become mainstream.

2 For more extensive reviews covering various periods of the Baltic States' relations with Russia see Berg, Eiki/Ehin, Piret (eds.): Identity and Foreign Policy: Baltic-Russian Relations and European Integration, Ashgate 2009; Jakniūnaitė, Dovilė: A Small State in the Asymmetrical Bilateral Relations: Lithuania in Lithuanian-Russian Relations since 2004, in: Baltic Journal of Political Science 4 (2015), pp. 70–93; Muižnieks, Nils (ed.): The Geopolitics of History in Latvian-Russian Relations, Riga 2011; Furman, Ekaterina/Muižnieks, Nils/Pelnens, Gatis: Latvia and the Russian Federation: Twenty Years of Relations, in: Zagorsky, Andrei (ed.) Russia and East Central Europe after the Cold War, Prague 2015, pp. 201–238; Veebel, Viljar: Russian Propaganda, Disinformation, and Estonia's Experience, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 4 October 2015, http://www.fpri.org/article/2015/10/russian-propaganda-disinformation-and-estonias-experience, last access: 21 March 2021; Vitkus, Gediminas: Lietuvos ir Rusijos santykiai 1990–1996 metais [Lithuania-Russia relations 1990–1996], in: Politologija 9 (1997), pp. 56–105.

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2.1 Preparing for Integration (1994–2004)

Almost immediately after Russian troops left, the Baltic States began their demanding journey to become members of the EU and NATO. Membership in the Union and the Alliance implied the desire for a better life and the need to feel more secure by being away from Russia, if not on the map, at least mentally and 'civilisationally', to have someone to rely on in case of any threat, and to live with the backing of trustworthy partners.

After about a year of initial euphoria in response to Boris Yeltsin's Russia and its democratisation prospects, politicians in the Baltic States realised that it would take a long time to trust Russia and its decision-makers again, if ever. Many issues emerged: the 'near abroad' discourse indicating a willingness to mark Russia's neighbourhood as its own space, the adoption of military doctrine claiming Russia's special interest in the former Soviet space, the removal of liberal-minded Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Kozyrev in 1996 and the appointment of Yevgeny Primakov who announced the Eurasian ideal for Russia in opposition to the United States and Europe. All this provided reasons in plenty to confirm that seeking security in the West was a rational move.

In this section, we first analyse Russia's sceptical and critical stance towards the integration agenda of the Baltic States, which they clearly saw as fully justifying their decision to be cautious about Russia. During this period two divisive issues emerged, debates on Russian-speaking minorities and debates on history, both of which have been solved, and continue to be the object of pressure and manipulation by Russian authorities and the media.

During the first few years, there were some debates regarding the possible foreign and security policy trajectories of the Baltic States, mainly put as the choice between neutrality and a clear alliance with the West.[3] However, at the end of 1993 these deliberations were over and the Baltic states jointly confirmed that their states saw NATO as their main security guarantee. The states were also well aware that it would be difficult to ensure their security on their own due to their size, limited economic resources and geopolitical situation. For these reasons, the key priorities of the security policy of the Baltic States after their declarations of independence were the establishment of effective regional and international cooperation mechanisms and the enhancement of interaction with Western collective security structures. None of the states directly claimed that their main consideration was to be guarded against Russia, but there were no doubts that it was all about Russia, its real or

3 Park, Andrus: Russia and Estonian Security Dilemmas, in: Europe-Asia Studies 1/47 (1995), pp. 27–45; Nekrašas, Evaldas: Is Lithuania a Northern or Central European Country?, in: Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review 1 (1998), pp. 1–19.

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imagined (depending on interpretations) threat, and the idea of not reliving the past stories of repeated occupations.

The Membership in NATO

For the Baltic States, NATO was considered the guarantor of independence and statehood, while membership in the EU was mostly focused on welfare and a better economic future for the population. The EU integration process was of no lesser importance for the Baltic States than NATO and in the end required much greater efforts in preparation for accession. Russia did not take the EU very seriously and so chose to focus on the process of integration with NATO, which therefore became central to bilateral relations between Russia and the Baltic States. Russia's prevailing geopolitical thinking and security considerations concerning military competition with the West were the main reasons for adopting this position. However, as it turned out much later, membership in the EU and the EU Russia policy were of no lesser consequence and irritation for Russia than NATO.

In 1994, the Baltic States joined NATO's Partnership for Peace initiative. Since then, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have been actively participating in NATO's peacekeeping missions and exercises and strengthening tri-national military cooperation.[4] The common projects not only increased their defence cooperation but also enabled economic, technological and military interaction between Baltic and NATO institutions. Three Baltic states received invitations to join the Alliance in 2002 in Prague,[5] and finally became members in April 2004.

Moscow strongly opposed the increasingly close ties between the Baltic States and NATO. Russia's efforts to prevent the Baltic States from joining NATO started in 1996 when President Yeltsin warned that NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe was not acceptable to Moscow. In his message to the US President Bill Clinton, he said that: 'Any steps in that [i.e. expansion] direction would directly challenge Russia's national security interests and undermine European stability and security'.[6] The narrative opposing the expansion of the Alliance was also reflected in Russia's strategic documents of that time.[7] NATO's plans for expansion into Eastern Europe

4 Beržiūnas, Valentinas: Santykiai su Latvija bei Estija ir Baltijos šalių bendradarbiavimas [Relations with Latvia and Estonia and Co-operation between the Baltic States], in: Jakniūnaitė, Dovilė (ed.): Ambicingas dešimtmetis: Lietuvos uzsienio politika 2004–2014 [The Ambitious Decade: Lithuanian Foreign Policy in 2004–2014], Vilnius 2015, pp. 209–227, here: pp. 215–217.

5 Žigaras, Feliksas: Baltijos šalys: saugumas ir gynyba 1990–2002 [The Baltic States: security and defence 1990–2002], Vilnius 2002.

6 Quoted in: Yeltsin Denounces Balts to Clinton, https://jamestown.org/program/yeltsin-denounces-balts-to-clinton, last access: 21 March 2021.

7 Russian National Security Blueprint, https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/blueprint.html, last access: 21 March 2021; National Security Concept of the Russian Federation', https://www.mid.ru/

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were portrayed as a major threat by all principal parties at the time and by the majority of Russian media.

In May 1997, NATO and Russia signed the Founding Act. Although it did not give Russia a veto over the Alliance's enlargement, the document stated that NATO would not deploy large numbers of troops or nuclear weapons in the territories of the new members.[8] Nevertheless, Russia viewed the agreements with the Alliance with suspicion. Russian security officials and analysts cited as objections the geopolitical position of the Baltic States and their strategic importance for Russia. According to them, membership of the Baltic States in NATO would mean the US military being deployed too close to the main political and economic centres of Russia. Furthermore, the country would become particularly vulnerable to air attacks.[9] The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, Yevgeny Primakov, while admitting that he did not believe that NATO would attack Russia, warned that the expansion could hypothetically lead to a situation in which Moscow would be forced to behave in a way no one would want.[10]

In 1997, President Yeltsin even offered Russian security guarantees to the Baltic States in exchange for not joining military blocs or unions. When they refused, Russia put them under economic pressure and suspended border agreements with Latvia and Estonia. In addition, Russia tried to persuade other European countries that Latvia and Estonia were violating the rights of the Russian-speaking population, that the Baltic States allegedly supported Chechen terrorists and that their membership in NATO would undermine the post-cold-war European security structure.[11] Russia even threatened to deploy nuclear weapons in the Kaliningrad enclave, and a plan for the military invasion of the Baltic States, if they became members of NATO, was leaked to the press.[12] In the Baltic States this was perceived as a clear warning that Russia would use all possible means, including military force, to defend its interests in the neighbourhood.

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foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/589768, last access: 21 March 2021.

8 Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation, 1997.

9 Donaldson, Robert H./Nogee, Joseph L.: The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests, Armonk et.al. 2005³.

10 Götz, Elias: Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine Policy, 1991–Present, in: Contemporary Politics 3/22 (2016), pp. 301–323, here: pp. 308–309.

11 Black, J. L.: Russia and NATO Expansion Eastward: Red-Lining the Baltic States, in: International Journal 2/54 (1999), pp. 249–266, here: pp. 255–259; Oldberg, Ingmar: Reluctant Rapprochement: Russia and the Baltic States in the Context of EU and NATO Enlargements, Stockholm 2003, pp. 21–22.

12 Götz: Neorealism, p. 310.

The Minority Question

In the context of NATO enlargement, debates about the status and situation of Russian-speaking minorities in Latvia and Estonia featured prominently in Russian criticism. In 1991, Russian speakers made up respectively 30 and 40 per cent of the Estonian and Latvian population. Having deep concerns over the excessive influence of the Russian speakers on political processes, the political leaders of Latvia and Estonia decided not to grant citizenship automatically to residents who had come from other republics of the Soviet Union between 1940 and 1989, when they were still Soviet Socialist Republics. Even though the laws of both countries provided that citizenship could be acquired by passing Latvian and Estonian language and history exams, a significant number of Russian speakers did not take up this opportunity for several reasons. As the representatives of the Russian-speaking diaspora supported the independence aspirations of Latvia and Estonia, they expected to acquire citizenship automatically. In addition, some Russian speakers considered compulsory examinations both in language and history humiliating, while the elderly complained that learning the Latvian and Estonian languages was too difficult for them. On top of that, their attitudes to history differed, i.e. not all Russians acknowledged that Estonia and Latvia had been occupied by the Soviet Union. Those who did not pass the exams or refused to take them became so-called non-citizens. They were subject to certain restrictions, including deprivation of the right to vote, prohibition of work at public institutions, etc.

The issue of the Russian-speaking minorities in Latvia and Estonia became a major topic in Russian Baltic policy.[13] The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 1993 pointed out that improper treatment of Russians in the 'near abroad' may be treated as the basis for military intervention,[14] and The Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 stressed that ensuring the rights of the Russian-speaking diaspora was a key condition for positive relations with the Baltic States.[15] Latvia and Estonia were accused not only of discrimination, but of ethnic cleansing and even of having an apartheid policy. Russia demanded that the so-called zero option be applied, i.e. grant citizenship to all residents, as Lithuania and other former Soviet republics did, or allow dual citizenship. The Russian government was outraged that the decision to treat the Latvian and Estonian languages as the only official languages discriminated against the Russian language spoken by a large number of

13 Herd, Graeme P.: Russia's Baltic Policy After the Meltdown, in: Security Dialogue 3/30 (1999), pp. 197–212, here: p. 199.

14 The Basic Provisions of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/russia-mil-doc.html, last access: 21 March 2021.

15 The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm, last access: 21 March 2021.

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people. Lithuania was also criticised for its stance towards the Russian language: it was argued that Lithuanisation was carried out to exclude the Russian language from public life.[16]

Russia not only linked the issue of the Russian-speaking diaspora to freezing the border agreements with Latvia and Estonia but also tried to use it to prevent the Baltic States from acceding to NATO and the EU.[17] Russia repeatedly appealed to different international organisations accusing Latvia and Estonia of violating international conventions. When the Western countries disregarded these accusations, Russia blamed them for applying double standards and prioritising geopolitical interests. It should however be noted that the citizenship laws of Latvia and Estonia were also criticised by the EU, the OSCE and other international organisations, so that the states were forced to reconsider their, initially very restrictive, citizenship laws. However, it was perceived by Latvia and Estonia that Russia sought to use national minorities to project its influence and manipulate the mood of the local population, and the Baltic States understood this as a threat to their independence.

Debates about History

Another contentious issue, which emerged quickly and resurfaces periodically through the years, is the debate about history. The Baltic States and Russia disagree on a number of issues of historical memory starting with the interpretation of the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States and ending with the establishment of state borders, and the assessment of World War II.[18]

In 2000, the Russian government published a statement outlining that in 1940 the Baltic States were not forced to join the USSR. According to the document, they joined voluntarily on the basis of international law and allowed the Red Army to enter their territories. Consequently, any talk of the occupation and annexation did not reflect political, historical and legal reality. The Baltic States reacted swiftly and emotionally, not accepting this interpretation and emphasising the fact of occupation and the crimes of the Stalinist regime. They demanded that Russia compensate them for the damage suffered during the occupation amounting to

16 Oldberg: Reluctant Rapprochement, pp. 39–40.

17 Lithuania signed the border treaty with Russia in 1997 becoming the first country in the post–cold war era to have fully settled its border issues with the Russian Federation. However, the ratification process took longer: while Lithuania was quick in ratifying, Russia – only in 2003. Latvia and Russia finalised their borders only in 2007, although the agreement was reached in 2005. The Estonian-Russian border treaty has not been ratified as of the end of 2020 because of historical disputes over the Tartu peace treaty signed in 1920 between the two states.

18 Jakniūnaitė, Dovilė, 'Santykiai su Rusija: dešimt nestabilaus stabilumo metų' [Relations with Russia: Ten Years of Unstable Stability], in: ibid. (ed.): Ambicingas dešimtmetis, pp. 100–126, here: p. 81.

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billions of euros, and Lithuania has even adopted a law on reparations for the occupation period.

The reparations issue has always provoked Moscow's annoyance. According to Moscow, the resolution passed on 24 December 1989 by the Congress of the People's Deputies acknowledged that the Molotov–Ribbentrop secret protocols were not legally binding due to their violation of third countries' sovereignty and independence.[19] Thus, Russia considers the case closed; as Russian President Vladimir Putin said in 2005: '[the pact] did not reflect the opinion of the Soviet people but was the personal affair of Stalin and Hitler. How can we be clearer and more precise on this point? [...] We think that this question is closed.'[20]

The problem of different interpretations of history also emerges when discussing the issue of fascist occupation. Russia repeatedly used the narrative of fascism against the Baltic States. It insisted that, although the Baltic States maintained a principled position on Stalinist crimes, such as mass deportations, they did little to address the crimes of the Nazi period and the individuals involved.[21] Latvia was particularly criticised in 1998 when it declared the Remembrance Day of the Latvian Legionnaires a public holiday. The day commemorated the Latvian servicemen who fought in Nazi Germany's SS division during World War II. Russian communists and nationalists did not miss the opportunity to draw the world's attention to the acts of vandalism against the monuments of World War II in some Latvian cities. It was alleged that a neo-fascist sentiment was spreading rapidly in the Baltic States with the aim of rewriting the history of the World War II and turning Nazi criminals into heroes.[22]

An obstacle in Baltic-Russian relations for a long time became the transfer of the so-called bronze soldier[23] from the centre of the Estonian capital Tallinn to the cemetery in 2007. This was followed by a large-scale cyber-attack against Estonian authorities and financial structures, which turned into riots and showed that historical issues would remain.[24] Thus, the Baltic States look at the problem of

19 Laurinavičius, Česlovas: The Role of History in the Relationship between Lithuania and Russia', in: Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review 2005, Vilnius 2006, pp. 109–125, here: p. 112.

20 Press Statement and Responses to Questions Following the Russia-European Union Summit, 10 May 2005, http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22967/print, last access: 21 March 2021.

21 Kramer, Mark: NATO, the Baltic States and Russia: A Framework for Sustainable Enlargement, in: International Affairs 4/78 (2002), pp. 731–756, here: p. 735.

22 Black: Russia and NATO Expansion Eastward, p. 263.

23 The Bronze Soldier is a monument erected by the Soviet authorities in 1947 in Tallinn to commemorate, from a Soviet and Russian perspective, the liberation of Estonia by the Red Army from German occupation in September 1944 and to honour the fallen soldiers of the Red Army.

24 Ehala, Martin: The Bronze Soldier: Identity Threat and Maintenance in Estonia, in: Journal of Baltic Studies 1/40 (2009), pp. 139–158.

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different interpretations of history as threatening their claims of sovereignty, if not physically at least symbolically and emotionally, and also as proof that Russia has in no way changed since its previous historical incarnations, since non-recognition of the occupation seems to reflect the problematic nature of Russia's relationship with the Soviet era and the view about the Baltic States as their 'own' neighbourhood.

2.2. New Members, Same Russia (2004–2014)

In April 2004, the three Baltic States became members of NATO and a month later of the EU. The general mood regarding Russia before becoming members and immediately after was optimistic. It was assumed that belonging to the new club would mean that the Baltic States would have less to worry about from Russia, as Russia would be forced to 'abandon its post-imperial manners and treat the Baltics as "normal" countries.'[25]

In some sense, NATO membership definitely helped to move away from the Russian claim for its 'privileged' sphere of influence and eased some existing threats. Apart from the increased sense of security, NATO contributed to the material security: the airspace of Baltic States was now defended by NATO air police mission ensuring constant surveillance and control.[26] However, the optimistic outlook was shattered rather quickly and Russia after all was not removed from their security agenda. Disagreements over history, disputes about minority issues had not disappeared, and moreover other issues were added to the contentious agenda.

During that decade, there were differences among the three states in how intensive the Russian threat was perceived: most of the time, Lithuania has been the most vocal and principled critic, while the position of the Estonian and Latvian governments differed a little more, the latter being the softest. In one of the reports reviewing relations between Russia and EU Member States written in 2007, Lithuania together with Poland was called a 'New Cold War Warrior' with an overtly hostile relationship with Russia, while Latvia and Estonia were included in the 'Frosty Pragmatist' group which focused 'on business interests, but are less afraid

25 Ehin, Piret/Eiki Berg: Incompatible Identities? Baltic-Russian Relations and the EU as an Arena for Identity Conflict', in: ibid. (eds.): Identity and Foreign Policy: Baltic-Russian Relations and European Integration, Ashgate 2009, pp. 1–14, here: p. 3.

26 Till 2014 the physical presence of NATO was limited to air-policing, but then it started gradually strengthen its eastern flank in the Baltic States and Poland. Since 2016, each Baltic state (and Poland) has a multinational battalion-size battlegroup on a rotational basis. These battalions are described as the 'enhanced forward presence'. NATO calls this move 'the biggest reinforcement of Alliance collective defence in a generation'. See Boosting NATO's presence in the east and southeast, October 20, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm, last access: 21 March 2021.

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than others to speak out against Russian behaviour on human rights or other issues.'[27] Latvia was the most 'pragmatic' in their relations with Russia until 2014. It adopted the most accommodating tone, trying to build 'relations on a pragmatic and rational basis without emphasizing the contested historical discourses.'[28]

Tactical and stylistic differences notwithstanding, two main reasons brought all three Baltic States to emphasise the importance of the Eastern dimension of the EU Neighbourhood policy in their own foreign policy agendas. First, they needed to differentiate themselves in the EU foreign policy field by emphasising their unique expertise both in the region and in the process of accession and integration to the EU, expertise which could be passed on to the less experienced (as they were perceived) partners in the East. Second, Baltic States assumed that the more democratic and more pro-European the Eastern neighbours were, the less they depended on Russia and the less they were subject to its influence. The Baltic States therefore strongly supported the regime change in Georgia in 2003 and the Ukrainian 'Orange Revolution' in 2004, and have been supporting and promoting EU accession for Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia.

Therefore, against this background, the most traumatic event of the period was the five-day Georgian-Russian war in August 2008 after which Georgia lost control of its regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which thus became controlled by, and politically, military and financially dependent on Russia. Later, in September, the President of Russia Dimitry Medvedev defined the principles of Russian foreign policy, one of which concerned regions where Russia has 'privileged' interests that it is prepared to defend.[29]

For the political elites and the population of the Baltic States, the Georgian-Russian war and Russia's subsequent actions confirmed that Russia posed a real immense threat, and that it could easily attack their countries. For example, the then President of Lithuania Valdas Adamkus stated that 'Russia's next victim will be Crimea followed by the Baltic states and South Caucasus.'[30] The fact that large Russian-speaking communities lived in Estonia and Latvia was also perceived as a direct threat by part of the Baltic population and an easy excuse for Russia to intervene.

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27 Leonard, Mark/ Popescu, Nicu: A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations, London 2007, p. 2.

28 Beitāne, Anna: A Reassessment of Latvia's Foreign Policy Strategy Towards Russia After the Ukraine Crisis, in: Latvian Foreign and Security Policy Yearbook 2015, Riga 2015, pp. 55–70, here: p. 59.

29 Reynolds, Paul: New Russian World Order: The Five Principles, BBC News, 1 September 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7591610.stm, last access: 21 March 2021.

30 BNS, V. Adamkus laukia okupacijos [V. Adamkus is waiting for the Occupation], Kauno diena, 16 September 2008, http://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/lietuva/salies-pulsas/vadamkus-laukia-okupacijos-449016, last access: 21 March 2021.

All in all, the Georgian-Russian war deeply marked the Baltic States' thinking about Russia and its possible actions. The war took place in the 21st century between two European states and brought the sobering realisation that Russia was prepared to go much further than anybody expected. Another sobering realisation for the Baltic States came several months after the war when Western European states quickly forgot the Georgia situation and started the engagement process with Russia, while the USA launched its reset policy towards Russia. It took another six years and the bloody events in Ukraine for the majority of Western countries to accept that Russia is totally prepared to defend what it considers as its zone of interest.

Meanwhile, the direct confrontation between the Baltic States and Russia continued in non-military areas. 'Memory wars' continued, as did Russia's criticism and pressuring of Latvia and Estonia regarding their Russian-speaking population. Russia also increased its pressure on the economic sector, particularly by starting to use energy more actively as a foreign policy tool. The Baltic States have always been greatly dependent on Russian gas and oil – near 90 per cent dependence for oil and almost 100 per cent for gas and electricity until around 2014/15.[31] Paradoxically, energy dependence on Russia after EU accession increased, mainly due to the closure of the Ignalina nuclear power plant in Lithuania which was a requirement for Lithuania's accession.[32]

Russia has used this dependence to pressure the Baltic States in various ways. For example, it suspended oil supplies to Latvian port operator 'Ventspils Nafta' in 2003 before accession to NATO and the EU, to the Lithuanian oil refinery 'Mažeikių Nafta' in 2006 in order to put pressure on selling its refinery plant to a Russian company, and partially stopped the oil supply rail route to Estonia in 2007 coinciding with Russian criticism of Estonia's relocation of the bronze soldier memorial in Tallinn. Such events, as well as the difficulty in bargaining over gas prices with 'Gazprom', forced the Baltic States to accelerate the diversification of their gas and electricity supply. Lithuania, for example, has built a liquid gas terminal; all three states began building electricity connections with other countries around the Baltic Sea, and in general, energy independence became one of the national security priorities for all the Baltic States. The emphasis on energy security has become another, albeit less direct, way for the Baltic States to talk about the Russian threat, implying the manipulative way Russian economic policy is used for political means and having quite a few reasons to back up such security considerations.

31 Riva, Gianmarco: The Baltic States and Energy Security: How Else Can the EU Foster Their Energy Resilience in the Face of Russian Pressure?', in: Ponars Euarasia - Policy Memos No. 665, July 2020.

32 Before the closure, the Ignalina nuclear plant generated around 70 per cent of Lithuanian electricity.

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Thus, despite the hopes and expectations raised by successful accession to the EU and NATO, the Baltic States have not been able to distance themselves from Russia, its actions, and its rhetoric. This was partly related to how the Baltic States perceived Russian foreign policy in the region and globally: Russia was becoming more and more assertive and categorical, and as the Georgian-Russian war demonstrated, more aggressive not only rhetorically, but militarily as well. Such a policy created a context for the feelings of insecurity strengthened by Russia's direct actions and policies towards Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, which took mainly an economic or rhetorical form, but always served as a reminder that Russia not only remains too close to their borders, but is also far too willing to be involved in the domestic policies and minds of their populations.

2.3. New and Old Fears (2014–2020)

As the previous two sections have revealed, Russia has been a dominant player in the foreign and security thinking of the Baltic States since they regained independence. The idea that Russia posed a threat was in general an uncontroversial statement, and political leaders of the Baltic States were vocal and blunt in expressing this view (with Lithuania leading the field). Nevertheless, this did not mean that ideas about pragmatic cooperation in some sectors or the possibility of dialogue were not considered. The securitisation was neither absolute, nor final. However, in general the situation was perceived in fatalistic terms: the geopolitics of the countries and the 'nature' of Russia determined this feeling of insecurity. Western partners usually perceived this stance of the Baltic States as an expression of their historical traumas, or sometimes just as some attention-seeking strategy. That perception seemed to the Balts to be a sign of Western complacency or careless pragmatism.

2014 saw a change in this situation when attitudes towards Russia changed throughout Europe. This was mainly due to the Crimean occupation and Russia's involvement in the war in the eastern part of Ukraine and its support for the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk 'republics'. These events created a sense of insecurity, not only for the Baltic States, but also for most of the Central Eastern European countries and forced the leaders of the Western European states to accept Russia's aggressive stance as a fact.

Since then, there has been strong mainstream agreement that Russia is a challenger to the EU, if not a major threat. Events in Ukraine and the criticism of Russia provided the Baltic States with the means to demonstrate not only support for Ukraine, but also to demonstrate their moral and principled position vis à vis other, especially Western European states highlighting their acute judgement about Russia.

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However, in public discourse one significant change took place which had not previously been openly and widely discussed – the blatant acknowledgment of the idea that Russia might actually invade the Baltic countries. Using the words of the Estonian Information Board written in 2016, all the positions could be summed up as follows: 'the policies adopted by the current Russian government will remain the greatest factor threatening the military security of the Baltic Sea region in the near future' and 'the use of military power against the Baltic States cannot be entirely ruled out'.[33] As of now, this estimation in the Baltic States has not changed much. For example, the Lithuanian National Threat Assessment of 2021 states that 'Russia's growing military potential will pose a threat to the national security of Lithuania.'[34] The similar Estonian report of the same year explains why: 'Considering that Russia's policies in the neighbouring region remain unchanged [...], the coming years will highly likely bring new crises in the region, creating both direct and indirect security threats for Estonia and more broadly for Europe.'[35] Usually, the security services also indicate that the probability of direct military confrontation is low, keeping in mind also the added security guarantees that were received from NATO and partners after 2014. Nevertheless, concerns about the destabilising military potential of Russia remain strong.

Many factors in Russia's militarisation have been of concern to observers, such as, Russia's military reform with comprehensive modernisation, increased defence spending, growing investments in new anti-access/area-denial capabilities, new surveillance and reconnaissance systems, advanced missiles, and 'Iskander' tactical ballistic missiles.[36] Several extensive military exercises were held close to the borders of the Baltic States to simulate occupation of the states (in 2009 as well as in 2013 and 2017).[37]

There is also the Kaliningrad issue. Kaliningrad is a small enclave (*oblast)* located between Lithuania and Poland, which is heavy militarised, serves as a base for the Russian Baltic fleet, has a large military garrison, an air defence system, and where Iskander ballistic missiles were deployed in 2016.[38] In addition, Russian transit, both military and civilian, goes through Lithuanian territory. On the one hand,

33 Estonian Information Board: International Security and Estonia 2016, p. 9.

34 State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania, and Defence Intelligence and Security Service under the Ministry of National Defence: National Threat Assessment 2021, p. 11.

35 Estonian Information Board: International Security and Estonia 2021, p. 7.

36 Smith, Julianne/Hendrix, Jerry: Assured Resolve: Testing Possible Challenges to Baltic Security, Washington 2016, p. 7.

37 Lucas, Edward: The Coming Storm: Baltic Sea Security Report, Washington 2015, p. 9.

38 Reuters: Russia Transfers Nuclear-Capable Missiles to Kaliningrad, The Guardian, 8 October 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/08/russia-confirms-deployment-of-nuclear-capable-missiles-to-kaliningrad, last access: 21 March 2021.

the enclave itself is vulnerable to various disruptions of services (gas, electricity, and railway connections go through Lithuanian territory). On the other hand, the heavy militarisation of the region is a threat not just to Lithuania: for example, the Iskander missile has a range of up to 500 km, thus being able to target not only Vilnius, but other capitals nearby. Military experts estimate that NATO forces in the region could hardly withstand Russia because of its possibility to control so-called Suwalki Gap[39] and therefore easily cut off the Baltic States' land connection.[40]

It should be noted that all these objective threats are not totally new: military transit through Kaliningrad has been a vulnerability for Lithuania since the agreement on transit rules was reached in 1995, airspace violations are so frequent that they are not even reported in the media, and we now see the effects of Russian military modernisation rather than its inception.[41] It is however the context that has changed: Russian occupation and its interference in the war in Ukraine and consequently NATO's acceptance of the need for an enhanced military presence in the eastern part of the alliance.[42]

Additionally, since 2014 it has become more and more apparent that Russia has developed vast information (and disinformation) capabilities for manipulating and exploiting digital space and social media outlets. The hostile rhetoric might not have changed substantially, but the volume and intensity have definitely increased.[43]

Again, for the Baltic States, Russian efforts to influence their public discourse were nothing new, and had been happening for a decade before. Such tropes as calling the Baltics 'fascist', denying Soviet occupation in 1940, criticising the treatment of national minorities, labelling the Baltics 'russophobic', single-issue states, 'puppets' of the West or of the United States had already been prevalent in Russian media with differing intensity for many years.[44] Consequently, over the last several years, the Baltic States have become more vocal, more aggressive and more open in fighting against what they perceive as Russia's propaganda.

39 Suwalki Gap, in NATO terminology, refers to the around 100 km long Polish border area with Lithuania, which connects the Baltic States with the Polish NATO partner and separates the territory of the Russian exclave Kaliningrad from Belarus.

40 Sukhankin, Sergey: Kaliningrad: From Boomtown to Battle-Station, in: European Council on Foreign Relations (blog), 27 March 2017, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_kaliningrad_from_boomtown_to_battle_station_7256/, last access: 21 March 2021.

41 Jakniūnaitė, Dovilė: Changes in Security Policy and Perceptions of the Baltic States 2014–2016, in: Journal of Baltic Security 2/2 (2016), pp. 6–34, here: p. 19.

42 NATO: Warsaw Summit Communiqué – Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw, 8–9 July 2016.

43 Veebel: Russian Propaganda.

44 Jurgelevičiūtė, Diana: The Issue of Occupation in Lithuanian-Russian Relations: Information Security Aspects', in: Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review 18 (2006): pp. 56–82; Laurinavičius: The Role of History.

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Concerns about possible Russian aggression, propaganda, and other tools of influence have also affected domestic politics – worries about interference in elections, the impact of Russian media on the population and its attitudes, and the role of Russian business in the Baltic countries. For example, since 'protecting the rights of Russians' or 'Russian speakers' was the dominant rhetoric during the occupation of Crimea, Russian comments about the situation of Russian speakers in the Baltic States could also be seen almost like a warning in the new context. Although there is little data supporting the idea that Russian speakers would somehow be more supportive of Russian intervention in any of the Baltic States, though they are more pro-Russian than the general population,[45] they are still considered the 'weakest link'. All these factors demonstrate the insecurity of all three Baltic States as regards their territorial integrity and sovereignty, and also underlie how they have affirmed their cohesion and societal resilience when thinking about and dealing with Russia up to the present time.

3. Conclusions

Ever since relations between Russia and three Baltic States first took form, they have almost never been called friendly or cooperative. There have been times when ideas of possibly improving the relations or re-engagement have appeared or have been seriously discussed. But, as one commentator has noted, the 'frustrated maximalism' of the Baltic States could never allow them to accept Russia as anything less than a democratic, European, modern state.[46] Anything else meant a massive possibility of Russia staying imperialist and untrustworthy, and therefore dangerous in the eyes of the Baltic States.

This attitude towards Russia is considerably influenced by the common past of the countries. The years of war, national oppression and Russification have shaped the attitude towards Russia as the hereditary and particularly dangerous enemy. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were hopes for the improvement of relations between. Indeed, the new leadership of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic supported independence for the Baltic States, but quickly the new Russian government has contributed a great deal to increasing caution of the Baltic States towards Russia. Difficult negotiations on the withdrawal of the Soviet/Russian army and the demarcation of state borders, accusations against Latvia

45 Saldžiūnas, Vaidas: Lietuvos Tautinės Mažumos Įvertino V. Putiną Ir D. Grybauskaitę [Lithuanian National Minorities Assessed Putin and Grybauskaite], DELFI, 19 September 2016, http://www.delfi.lt/a/72329270, last access: 21 March 2021.

46 Liik, Kadri: Russia's 'Pivot' to Eurasia, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR103_RUSSIA_COLLECTION_290514_AW, last access: 21 March 2021.

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and Estonia of discrimination against Russian speakers living in those countries, different views on history and other issues proved that it was too early, if ever, to consider friendly relations with Russia.

Fear of Russia was the main reason for the Baltic States' desire to become members of the Western security structures. Despite Russia's assurances that it did not threaten its neighbours as well as its reconciliation with Baltic State membership in NATO and the European Union, Russia's action and rhetoric contributed greatly to the growing realisation that Russia sought to restore what was formerly known as Russian Empire. Meanwhile, the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine confirmed that Russia continues its traditional aggressive foreign policy.

As the last several years have demonstrated, the Baltic States were right, at least for now, to be sceptical about Russia and in some sense to feel vindicated for staying such 'cold war warriors'. This situation may possibly change one day, even though it is impossible to imagine what such a future would entail. For the moment, however, Russia remains a massive threat, creating acute existential anxiety for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which continue to focus all their foreign and much of their domestic policy efforts on diminishing this angst in as many ways as possible with their few resources and limited capabilities.

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