



Russia and the Baltic States: Some Results Interstate Relations

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Abstract

Geographically, the Baltic States border on Russia, and, in this sense, both parties objectively need to build constructive relations with each other on a range of issues. However, over the sovereign period after collapse of the USSR numerous thorny problems have been plaguing the relationships between the countries concerned. Arguably, in the contemporary span of time an array of dramatic discrepancies arises between Russia and the Baltic states. They should be sorted out and this settlement is vital for stable social-economic development of the entire Baltic region. Still, explicit anti-Russian policy and sentiments of the Baltic elites impede prospects for development of the mutually advantageous cooperation. Noteworthy, in an effort to design a new model of relationships between Russia and the Baltic States security issues along with the interests of the European Union (EU) and North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) feature a stumbling block. The attempts at exploiting historical memory also are another specific trait of the existent model. All these factors raise the question of accountability of the Baltic countries for the conducted policy and acceptance of its implications. From the authors' viewpoint, it is a dead-end model. The aim of this research is to find out specific characteristics of interaction between Russia and the Baltic States in the contemporary period of time. The interdisciplinary methodological scientific approaches, as well as the multifactorial balance methodology have been used, which make it possible to analyze dynamics and continuity of interstate relations within wide historical frameworks, since it is

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impossible to conceive of the modern politics without the entire genesis context. The conclusion was made: despite awareness of benefits from economic cooperation, the political and ideological nuances annihilate an opportunity for a dialogue. Forecasts for evolution of bilateral relations are quite pessimistic. Yet, further exacerbation of the Russian-Baltic relations is capable of confounding the internal policy of the Baltic States as well.

Keywords

The baltic region • The baltic states • Foreign policy • Russia's foreign policy • Political elites • Foreign economic affairs • Historical memory

The Baltic Sea region remains a forefront dimension in foreign policy of the Russian state. Having given an insight to history, this vector has been steady, in spite of the tricky political environment, which had been accompanying nascence of the Russian statehood. The three points can be figured out:

1. In N. M. Mezhevich's opinion, "historical value of the Baltic and Scandinavian directions within the policy of the Russian state has been determined by uninterrupted continuity of the Russian statehood in that direction, even in the feudal dispersion era and Tatar-Mongol invasion" (Mezhevich 2004).
2. Economic bonds, as a crucial element in the Baltic vector of the Russian state, have always been taking precedence over the political ambitions.
3. And, finally, a vast amount of actors on quite a small geographic territory has been the third constituent in the nascent relations model.

Nevertheless, after collapse of the USSR for a long period of time Russia had not had common understanding, which foreign policy with regards to the Baltic States it was to opt for. In 1990s there was a hope for maintenance of ties and pragmatic contacts, but there was no relevant strategy. The desire to establish relationships with "Grand Europe" under the Foreign Minister A. Kozyrev implied increased attention to Berlin, Paris, London, and Brussels—the traditional benchmarks in even the pre-Soviet policy.

That situation began changing, when "Grand Europe" itself turned to amending the game rules, having "securitized" politics in the Baltic Sea region.

Therefore, nowadays, we can indicate a series of factors, which are affecting the modern relations model within the Baltic region:

1. The Baltic States is a neighborly region, social-economic processes whereof might bring about either positive, or negative influence on adjacent Russia.
2. Having acceded to the EU and NATO, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania feature a unique case of the post-Soviet states. The outcomes of their political-economic development are meaningful to such countries as Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, drifting the same direction and other member-states of the Eastern Partnership, including Belorussia.

3. The Baltic States are absolute leaders in costs per capita on military programmes within NATO. On their territory NATO military exercises, involving Finland and Sweden, have been going on almost continually over the recent three consecutive years.
4. The Baltic States are the most zealous supporters, and at times the chief ideologists of Russo-phobic attacks at Russia, the anti-Russian foothold in the post-Soviet space. Interestingly, such a role is caused by a certain economic substantiation and, equally important, economic implications.
5. The Baltic States is a transit rival to Russia, however, under definite circumstances the Baltic States region has proved to be a bridge between the West and Moscow.
6. Acute maturity of interregional ties is also remarkable. The North-Western Federal District has been actively developing cooperation between subjects of the Russian Federation and the Baltic States.

Still, if we are going to devise a new model of relationships between Russia and the Baltic States, our reflections should stem from an array of points.

1. *Shifts in the political landscape.*

The new starts of electoral cycles (parliamentary elections in Latvia in October 2018 and in Estonia in March 2019, presidential elections in Lithuania in May 2019), which were held in the later half of 2018 and early half of 2019 cannot but shake the existing political and social-economic development patterns of the Baltic States.

Russo-phobia of their political elites has practically run out of its financial-economic steam. The EU dotation into the Baltic republics after 2020 is to plunge steeply. Economic benefits from NATO troop's deployments in the region are far too hazing. Moreover, it diminishes investment attractiveness.

Demographic situation is catastrophically deteriorating, the population level is declining, the best part of workforce, first and foremost, the youth, are moving to the West. Rampant corruption among the Baltic elites is getting ever more evident. In Estonia this is called "seemukapitalism", i.e. "barons' capitalism". Abidance by the formal rules governing functioning of economic institutions in case of breaking the principles of a real competitive market is another hallmark of economic models prevailing in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Prospects for growth of the economy's real sector in the region, including the transit sector, in the context of sanctions warfare with Russia seem to be quite illusive. The Baltic region has turned into the backyards of the EU and the frontline district from the "storefront" of the Soviet Union. Inertial movement towards the same direction is likely to put the issue of economic viability/financial solvency to the agenda of the next decade (after 2021).

Under these circumstances, the electoral cycle 2018–2019 is theoretically able to cause alternations in the political generations—from Russophobes to pragmatists. The latter category denotes political persons, who prefer social-economic benefit to

the belligerent rhetoric. Nevertheless, the reverse scenario should not be considered a lost cause: total ethnic mobilization with a view to put the blame on the ethnic minorities and Russia for all hardships piled up over the recent years.

2. *Security issues*

The Ukrainian crisis, “Skripal affair”, sanctions policy and ambassadors expulsion, i.e. new elements of the odious Western policy have adjusted the roles of the Baltic countries in the political arena. The new security concept adopted by the Baltic States relies upon the two pillars: absolute confidence that the danger emanates from Russia and irrational policy towards its own citizens.

As such, on March 3rd, 2018 presidents of Latvia (Raimonds Vējonis), Lithuania (Dalia Grybauskaitė) and Estonia (Kersti Kaljulaid) conducted negotiations with president of the USA, Donald Trump. At the summit dedicated to centenary of separation of the Baltic States from Russia, heads of republics asked Trump to reinforce NATO military commitment in the Baltic region and touched upon the issue of the US natural gas supplies (Bovdunov 2018). “The USA expressed readiness to hand over 170 million US dollars to the Baltic countries as a military aid. Another 3 million US dollars is to be allocated for informational resistance, as it was stated in the White House press-release” (Bovdunov 2018). On April 9th, 2018 in Paris a meeting of the Baltic presidents with president of France Emmanuel Macron was held. There, as press-releases reported, “Great attention should be paid to tackling challenges in the sphere of international security and cooperation in defense sphere” (Macron will of the presidents of the Baltic States in Paris 2018). Undoubtedly, visits to the USA and Europe are essential to the political elites of the Baltic States. The ultimate question—what will they bring about? A range of analysts believe, “being aware of their “consumables” status, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania solicit the Western allies to concentrate in the Baltic region as many troops as possible, so as to somehow inflate their reputation” (Ishchenko 2018). The fact that Russia is not going to occupy the Baltic neighbors is likely to cause political failure of this policy. But by that time already weak budget would have been shattered by defense expenditures, the promised financial injections would have appeared to be less than it was pledged, or spent on some projects, and countries themselves would have been crowded with Western troops. The migration issue is possibly to arise thornily again. “The experts reckoned: if all emigrants did not return, and emigration kept on, in a couple of years the Baltic States would turn into the retirees’ country (mainly those, who would be beyond their sixties)” (The youth went to work in Europe: why the Baltic States are empty the farm and the city 2018). In a similar vein, another fact is notable, Eurostat showed to Latvia residents all-out weakness of social welfare funding in their country. Latvia lags behind practically all European countries, emulating only Romania, with social welfare indicating even lower—14.6% of GDP” (Eurostat: Latvia is the penultimate country in terms of social protection costs 2017). In Lithuania doctors continually complain of non-payment of their wages and take to streets on demonstration almost on a constant basis (Eurostat: Latvia is the penultimate country in terms of social

protection costs 2017). And Estonia's report by the State Control Department "presented that the state should prepare for a situation, whereby European compensations and allowances would shrink already in the new budgetary period—according to the figures provided by the Finance Ministry let alone a Brexit impact, approximately by 40%, i.e. by 1.5 billion Euro" (Estonia is preparing to tighten the belt: EU funding will decrease 2017). Yet, Lithuania is ready to invest nearly 770 million euro (the country's GDP is 39 billion euros) in national defense in 2018. Latvia's military budget in 2018 stood at 576 million euro that was 126 million larger than in the previous year (the republic's GDP—about 40 billion euro). Estonia's military budget is approximately 418 million euro (GDP exceeds 20 billion euro)" (Hrolenko 2017). Amid these negative economic indices military strife appears to be quite irrational.

Today the attitude of the Baltic States to Russia is utterly politicized, and the Russian threat is "securitized". What does it usher in? The organic path of relations development implies breakdown of economic ties, lost opportunities in the economy and politics. It can be stated that the adverse economic effect in view of the Russian immensity is almost impossible to calculate, however the Baltic economies suffer from annual losses amounting to 10% of GDP. Political losses are harder to estimate in quantifiable terms. The anti-Russian rhetoric of the Baltic politicians puts certain pressure on the European power elites and public opinion. However, the principal effect is achieved through discrediting Russia as an economic partner, deliberate placing the country's exports at competitive disadvantage. Thereby, we can argue about increasing economic, political, and social risks in the region.

3. The effect of the European Union in the Baltic region

In opinion of the expert I. Busygina, "Integration has been acquiring favorable reputation in the eyes of separate countries as they gained specific benefits from implementing specific, more modest cooperation projects along definite cooperation realms, rather than generalist ones" (Busygina 2013).

The matters of integration and cooperation between the EU and Russia within the Baltic region, search for models, which would make it possible to pull out of the worrying situation is still a priority for the Russian scholars. The key issue is, certainly, the economy, which edges us closer to a vision that the previous models of international relations, including international economic relations, are unlikely to endure any more in the nearest future.

In the context of the Baltic region, we are passing over to the situation of norms lack. All parties concerned should work, ensure economic growth, and create their own integration fields. One of the probable variants is to follow the integrational suit of the Eurasian Union with the European Union. But so far, we have accumulated such a volume of discrepancies that it is unclear, how to escape this trap. Too many ideological complexes obfuscate this riddle.

In this sense, a new factor of China's presence, which is interested equally in Russia and states, surrounding it in the post-Soviet area, as well as in Europe, as it is clear that all projects under the aegis of the "new Silk Road" do not mean Moscow

as the final station, they include many other stations, with most of them located in Europe. And here, absence of complexes and an aggregate of the Estonian-Chinese, Chinese-Lithuanian, etc. conflicts is likely to play into hands. Building a strategic partnership between Russia and China might gender some kind of an interim format, a new model of new Eurasian integration, particularly given that China has been taking a strong interest in Northern Europe and cooperation with Belorussia.

As far as grand Eurasian integration is concerned, several equal partners are implied. Kazakhstan is another eminent player, which is interested in paving the common corridor, rather than designing routes only to Astana. Such logic might speed up creation of a new relations model. Moreover, we are witnessing that nowadays the European integration is going through not the best of times. It became unsuccessful, when the goal of integration turned into a process as a result of some compound evolution, complicated by vague techniques of spatial expansion combined with innate increasing complexity and bureaucratic immobilization. The era of the European integration had set out after World Wars and came to an end after the Maastricht agreements, when intake of new states triggered almost an unmanageable situation, failed the European Constitution and brought on Brexit. Undoubtedly, the very ideas of the European civilization and European values are eternal; they are still landmarks for Russia. However, the great European idea should not be replaced by expedience of the current political situation, what the Baltic countries are aspiring to.

To conclude, we can state that the position of the Baltic States within the Russian system of foreign political and foreign economic priorities remain crucial. Still, in the recent years analysis of all versions of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept has been testifying that the Baltic countries are becoming less meaningful. Russia, in its turn, is also unwilling to go along for the sake of an advantageous dialogue even at heavy concessions. Obviously, Russia has got tired of practically unilateral attempts at inspiring the dialogue. Theoretically, after shifts in Baltic political elites countries might turn around from the mono-vector foreign policy to its multi-pronged model—i.e. resort to the potential of the traditional geographic-historical ties. However, after 2014 developments such a scenario seems to be almost impossible. A strict anti-Russian course, which has been consecutively pursued in the recent years, is blended in shaping public opinion, political slogans, political, particularly, economic practices. The compatriots issue in the Baltic States features a separate topic for the discussion.

The lesson here is that under the present conditions the Russian policy should not respond to slight changes in foreign policies of our Baltic neighbors. Individual moves by our partners aimed at revision of the course and solution of the most urgent issues should also be taken into account. In particular, Saint-Petersburg, the Leningrad region, the Kaliningrad region are the key agents of the state foreign policy in the region. Development of cooperation within the regional organizations (the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Union of the Baltic Cities, the Baltic Development Forum) is also prospective. Russia endeavors a lot in conversion of these international organizations into the platforms for joint coordination of foreign affairs within the region.

Russia should garner general amendments of the political course in neighboring countries to the level of pragmatic cooperation, without making trade-offs on those principled stances in politics and economy, which are outlined in this paper.

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