



Reinventing 'new' Europe: Baltic perspectives on transatlantic security reconfigurations



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the self-positioning of the three Baltic states in international politics in relation to the major structural pressures challenging the *status quo* of the transatlantic security configuration. The constitutive role of the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, the global economic recession, the debt crisis in the eurozone, and the shifting policy preferences and force projection of the United States towards Asia are explored as the key sources of the emerging Baltic security predicament. The empirical conclusions of the poststructuralist discourse analysis conducted for this study demonstrate how the Baltic states, in particular Estonia, have recently come to redefine the contents of 'new' Europe, thereby shifting the extant fault lines within the European Union.

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1. Three Baltic perspectives, not just one

there is no Baltic State, Hauptstadt Riga. Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the President of Estonia (2009c)

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are similar in their size, geopolitical predicament, structural constraints, and opportunities in international politics. This physical, geopolitical, and historical proximity¹ has naturally left an imprint on their security political mentality (Diplomaatia, 2010). This article questions a wide-spread assumption of both academic and policy quarters about regional identity presenting a more or less harmonized Baltic outlook on foreign and security affairs. Our analysis demonstrates the limits of this knee-jerk assumption of 'the Baltic way' in the sphere of foreign and security policies, emphasizing critical divergences between Estonia's, Latvia's, and Lithuania's profiles in the changing transatlantic security environment.

Still, even though Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have pursued similar austerity measures with divergent fiscal outcomes during dramatic economic recession, and have adopted varying defense policies and expenditures throughout the past decade, we admit that the three countries share a distinct asymmetry in their dealings with their much larger neighbor (David et al., 2011, p. 187). They have also a certain structural similarity in their relative marginality towards the possibilities to influence the pertinent policy-making in the Euro-Atlantic structures, making their comparison thus a worthwhile venture after all. The comparative study of the three Baltic states' takes on the recent transatlantic security reconfigurations, provides understanding of security of small states bordering large and politically ambitious, and occasionally hostile, neighbor. It

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¹ The convergence of Baltic histories is most significant in the context of the twentieth century. For historical divergences between Lithuania and its Baltic counterparts dating further back, see Kasekamp (2010) and Szporluk (2000).

further points to the broader contestation of the traditional and ever-expanding 'new' security agenda within the transatlantic security compact (Mälksoo, 2008).

In this article we consider the outlooks on the changing transatlantic security configuration of these three small Baltic countries in the north-eastern periphery of Europe as indicative of the broader dynamic within the transatlantic security community. Conjoining these three peripherally located countries, with an eye on structural similarities and differences, we aim to generate a broader message for the European 'core'. Conceptually, we argue that the perspectives and policies held and developed by the three Baltic states reiterate the analytic power of the multi-faceted understanding of security (Buzan et al., 1998). While the conclusions drawn about the respective political perceptions and stances have been more intuitive than grounded on first-hand empirical research so far, our additional aim is to offer up-to-date empirical reflection on the Baltic perspectives of the changing transatlantic security settlement since the Russia-Georgia war of 2008.

We are primarily probing two sets of questions here: first, what kind of political actors in terms of their security policies, do the Baltic states emerge in their respective discursive politics after 2008? Secondly, what amounts to the differences (or nuances, for some) in their self-designations against the backdrop of the changing transatlantic security arrangement? Our contribution recognizes the critical importance of the active self-designation of state actors for their positioning in international politics. Departing from the methodological premise that the making of the "self" is a narrative act (Epstein, 2011, p. 336), we employ discourse analysis in order to distinguish multiple identity claims and various tropes of security in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania after the Russia-Georgia war. Discourse analysis has proven its fruitfulness as a research method in critical study of international relations (Campbell, 1992; Hopf, 2002; Hansen, 2006). We explore policy documents and speeches by a diverse range of policy-makers in the three Baltic states as sources indicating the 'official' line. Related commentary and public debates in the media, as well as academic discourses, are regarded as supplementary sources for this study in order to unearth the potentially countervailing discourses on the changing security predicament of the "Baltic Three", besides the official discourse.

We examine the Baltic states' post-2008 self-positioning in relation to the major structural pressures challenging the *status quo* of the transatlantic security compact, namely the global economic recession and the debt crisis in the eurozone that is seriously affecting the defense spending of several European allies, as well as the shifting policy preferences and force projection of the United States (US) towards Asia. By choosing the Russia-Georgia war as a discursive nodal point for understanding the Baltic states' grappling with their emerging security predicament, we recognize the liminal nature of wars (Mälksoo, 2012). This analytic conclusion has fundamental implications for our research design, since the acknowledgment of the political and social productivity of wars enables us to examine the constitutive function that the Russia-Georgia war of 2008 has had for these three states' self-positioning in the Euro-Atlantic security community.

The paper puts forward an argument that the close reading of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian perspectives on the changing transatlantic security predicament over the past five years gives us greater critical purchase on the shifting fault lines in contemporary Europe. Our core claim is that the Baltic states, being generally depicted as part of the so-called 'new' Europe, have recently come to redefine the contents of the very notion, and therefore to also shift the existing dividing lines within the European Union (EU). This conclusion applies in particular to the case of Estonia (Mälksoo, 2013).

2. Contextual parameters

Events, my dear boy, events. Harold Macmillan

The global economic recession, protracted debt crisis in the eurozone, and the related structural constraints emerging in the Euro-Atlantic security arrangement have highlighted the multi-faceted nature of the contemporary security conundrum for the Baltic states with a particular poignancy. While the Russia-Georgia war of 2008 brought home the message of the continuing relevance of the traditional *military* security agenda for the Baltic Three, the Russian gas cut-offs of Ukraine have exacerbated the Baltic concerns for steady *energy* supply (Ilves, 2009a, 2009d). Meanwhile, the 2007 cyber-attacks that were accompanying riots and intense political pressure at Estonia in relation to the relocation of a Soviet-era Second World War monument reiterated the increasing relevance of *cyber* security in the ever-expanding list of the 'new' security concerns (Ilves, 2010b). The global economic crisis of 2008 hit the Baltic states hard, leading to the shrinking of their economies by 14–18% in 2009, underscoring the *economic* vulnerability of the region. Latvia took the fiercest blow of the recession in the Baltics, as its economy underwent a serious downturn at the beginning of 2008, leading the country to sign a loan agreement and program with the IMF. For Lithuania, the economic crisis was one of the core factors besides changes in the key government positions in 2009 that forced it to impose restraints on its recently adopted foreign political strategy of regional leadership.² The lack of resources has limited many of Lithuania's ambitious foreign policy goals to *ad hoc* initiatives and declaratory statements, with questionable political consequences. Likewise, due to the economic recession, the Estonian state budget underwent serious cuts in 2009 (when the defense budget amounted to €256 million, that is, 1.85 per cent of its gross domestic product, GDP), and further cuts in 2010 with the reduction of the defense budget to €248.86 million, that is, 1.74% of GDP (Kaljurand et al., 2012, p. 37).

² Before the economic crisis struck, an ambition to become a 'regional leader' in Eastern Europe (Paulauskas, 2004) had led Lithuania to display high levels of activity in the field of foreign policy, and make active use of the military instruments in the US-involved conflict areas. Lithuanian choices to send its forces to Iraq and Afghanistan (around 250 soldiers every six months since 2005), and to establish an independent Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan were directly stemming from this policy.

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