

Examining Post-Cold War Geopolitical Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe: The Baltic States' Path to EU and NATO Membership and the Evolving Dynamics of Relations with Russia

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Abstract

This article provides a detailed exploration of the geopolitical transformations in the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—following the Cold War, focusing on their journey towards the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership, and the evolving dynamics of their relations with Russia. It examines the historical backdrop of their accession, the processes involved, and the impacts on these states, including their interactions with Russia from initial tensions to diplomatic engagements. This study underscores the significance of EU and NATO integration for regional stability and delves into the complexities of the Baltic states' post-Cold War relations with Russia, offering insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by these states in establishing their independence and security in the contemporary geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: Baltic States, Russia, EU, NATO, Geopolitical Transformations

1. Introduction

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—stood at a historical crossroads, with their sights set firmly on redefining their national identities and securing a place within the Western geopolitical sphere. This article embarks on a detailed examination of their strategic journey towards membership in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), pivotal milestones that not only symbolized their departure from Soviet influence but also their commitment to

democratic governance, market economies, and collective security.

At the heart of this narrative is the Baltic states' nuanced navigation through the complex processes of EU and NATO accession—a path fraught with both internal reforms and external diplomatic engagements. This article meticulously analyzes the historical antecedents that paved the way for their integration into these Western institutions, highlighting the transformative policies implemented to meet the stringent criteria for membership. These efforts were underscored by a profound reshaping of

political structures, economic systems, and defense strategies, all of which were undertaken to align with European standards and expectations.

Equally significant to this discourse is the evolving relationship between the Baltic states and Russia. From the early post-Soviet era, characterized by heightened tensions and geopolitical uncertainties, to more recent attempts at diplomatic rapprochement, the article explores the delicate balance of maintaining sovereignty and security in the face of a historically dominant neighbor. It explores the strategic implications of the Baltic states' EU and NATO membership for regional stability, examining how these alliances have influenced their diplomatic postures and interactions with Russia.

By weaving together the threads of historical context, strategic integration efforts, and international relations, this article offers a comprehensive overview of the Baltic states' role in the broader narrative of post-Cold War European geopolitics. It sheds light on the challenges and triumphs encountered on their path to EU and NATO membership, and provides a nuanced understanding of their ongoing efforts to navigate the complexities of their relationship with Russia, all within the dynamic landscape of Central and Eastern European security and cooperation.

2. Historical Background

The Baltic Sea is an important waterway that connects countries in Central and Eastern Europe to the Atlantic Ocean, making it strategically and economically significant. In 1991, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania gained independence from the Soviet Union and started making their own social policies. A key focus was on language and education, where they decided that their national languages would be the only official languages, reducing the role of the Russian language in education. This move was to ensure that the national languages were taught in schools, a change from the past "Russification" efforts by Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, leading to significant changes in society within these states.

2.1 *The Evolution of Russian Influence and Russification in the Baltic Region*

2.1.1 From Ivan III to the Late 18th Century: Incorporation of Lithuania and Courland

The early Russian influence in the Baltic region can be traced back to the late 15th century. This influence began to take shape when Ivan III achieved independence from the Mongol Khanate in 1480. Subsequently, the Principality of Moscow embarked on a process of absorbing the successor states of the Golden Horde, extending its reach into the Baltic region. In 1558, Ivan IV initiated a conflict aimed at expanding Russian access to the Baltic Sea. This war targeted the Livonian Knights League, which comprised five bishoprics and feudal territories in the Baltic Sea region. As a result of this conflict, Russia gained control over Polotsk and parts of Lithuania. However, the Baltic Sea region remained under the dominion of German, Polish, and Swedish powers (Wren & Stults, 2009). The turning point came in 1700 when Peter I instigated the War of the North against Sweden. The Russian forces achieved a decisive victory at the Battle of Poltava in 1709, leading to the further expansion of Russian influence in the Baltic Sea region. In 1721, Russia and Sweden signed the Peace of Nystad, through which Russia acquired Lifland (including Riga), Estland, and portions of Karelia, establishing Russia as a dominant Baltic power.

Nonetheless, it wasn't until Poland underwent three partitions involving Tsarist Russia, Prussia, and Austria that the remaining Baltic Sea area became integrated into Russia's territory. The initial partition of Poland occurred in 1772, during which Catherine the Great acquired the territory situated between the Dnieper and Dvina rivers. This region, inhabited predominantly by Belarusians and Latvians, encompassed a population of 1.3 million. Subsequent partitions in 1793 and 1795 saw Russia gaining additional Lithuanian territory. By the time of the third partition in 1795, Tsarist Russia had encompassed the entirety of Lithuania. Additionally, Courland, which corresponds to present-day western Latvia, became part of Russia's expanding dominion (Millar, 2004).

2.1.2 Ekaterina II's Policies of Russification in the Baltic Region: Balancing Centralization and Ethnic Diversity

To diminish the privileged status of the German nobility in the Baltic region and bolster the Russian Empire's authority over it, Ekaterina II implemented a strategy known as "Russification." This policy comprised two primary components: firstly, a restructuring of

the local governance system to enhance centralization of power, and secondly, the promotion of the Russian language and the encouragement of conversion to Orthodox Christianity.

In the year 1775, Ekaterina II undertook a comprehensive reform of the local governance system. This reform involved dividing the empire into 50 provinces, each further subdivided into approximately ten districts. The overarching aim was to create uniform administrative structures, ultimately strengthening the empire's central authority and preserving the foundations of Russian authoritarianism. However, as the Russian Empire expanded, the population of non-Russians and non-Orthodox adherents under its rule witnessed significant growth. This expansion accentuated existing linguistic, religious, and cultural differences among the various groups within the empire.

Ekaterina II actively promoted the widespread use of the Russian language throughout the empire, including recently annexed regions. Simultaneously, efforts were made to encourage the local population to embrace Orthodox Christianity. Nevertheless, in the Baltic region, particularly in Livland and Esterland, a more moderate approach to "Russification" was adopted. This approach was guided by the pragmatic goals of maintaining the allegiance of the German population and ensuring administrative efficiency. Consequently, the extent of "Russification" measures in the Baltic region remained less pronounced compared to those implemented in Belarus and Ukraine (Millar, 2004).

2.1.3 Cultural and Political Transformations in the Baltic Region: Alexander III's Russification Policies in the 19th Century

In the 19th century, education for Germans in the Baltic region was primarily conducted in the German language. Some Estonians and Latvians who attended German-speaking schools were inevitably influenced by German culture. As Pan-Slavism and the Orthodox "messianic" spirit gained traction, Russian nationalism started to emerge, leading Russia to grow increasingly concerned about separatist tendencies in the Baltics.

During the reign of Alexander III, a more stringent policy of "Russification" was introduced, affecting the entire Baltic region.

This policy included the following key measures. In 1885, Alexander III appointed new governors for the Baltic provinces, including Livland, Estland, and Courland, which mainly encompassed Estonia and Latvia. These governors were specifically tasked with reducing German influence and promoting Russian culture and loyalty.

Starting in 1885, the Ministry of Education in St. Petersburg assumed control over primary education in the Baltic provinces. Russian was mandated as the language of instruction and the official language for municipal government, the judiciary, the police, regional governors, and some cities and universities had their names changed to Russian. Alexander III's "Russification" measures also had a significant impact on local religious practices. For instance, the offspring of Orthodox and Lutheran intermarriages were to follow Orthodox beliefs, and Lutheran clergy were prohibited from conducting unauthorized religious activities or baptizing Orthodox Christians (Gleason, 2014).

2.2 *Baltic States in the Mid-20th Century*

In the early 20th century, amid revolutionary chaos in the Russian Empire, Baltic states sought autonomy, forming political parties and parliaments in Latvia and Estonia. By 1920, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia gained independence through peace treaties. This freedom was brief, as World War II saw them become geopolitical victims, especially after the 1939 Soviet-German Pact placed them under Soviet control. By August 1940, following Soviet occupation, they were forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union as Union Republics.

2.2.1 Sovietization, Russification, and the Impact of Russian Immigration on the Baltic States during the Mid-20th Century: A Study of Culture, Demographics, and Political Dynamics

The process of "Sovietization" and "Russification" undertaken by the Soviet Government exerted profound and deleterious effects on the national culture and identity of the Baltic states. A considerable exodus of intellectuals, literary figures, and religious leaders ensued, as they sought refuge in Western countries. Concurrently, the Soviet Union forcibly relocated a substantial number of anti-Soviet individuals to Siberia, with statistics indicating 9,546 individuals in Latvia, 5,978 in Estonia, and 10,187 in Lithuania subjected to such relocation in 1941. This resulted in a

significant demographic depletion within the Baltic region. To counterbalance this loss of population and, more notably, to bolster political control over the Baltic states, the Soviet Union initiated the migration of a substantial number of Russian immigrants into the Baltic region. This influx aimed not only to address the labor shortage but also to reinforce political dominance (Mertelsmann, 2014).

The influx of Russian immigrants in the Baltic states assumed a dominant position within the realms of politics, economics, and society. To fortify the central government's control over these Baltic states, the Soviet regime strategically placed Russian immigrants in influential roles within the countries' leading institutions, effectively elevating their representation in positions of real power. Consequently, a disproportionately high number of Russians, relative to the indigenous population, occupied administrative roles across all levels of governance in the Baltic states. Furthermore, Russian immigrants generally exhibited elevated levels of education and enjoyed improved living standards. Primarily consisting of engineers and skilled workers, they predominantly resided in major urban centers such as Riga, Tallinn, and Vilnius. Notably, the educational attainment of Russian immigrants generally surpassed that of the local populace, contributing to their prominence in various spheres of Baltic society (Tismaneanu, 2010).

2.2.2 The Impact of Russian Language Education in the Baltic States: Policy, Dissent, and Cultural Implications during the Soviet Era

Concomitant with the influx of Russian immigrants into the Baltic states was the proliferation of Russian language education. This phenomenon initially took root in Latvia towards the conclusion of World War II, with Russian becoming a medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools, subsequently extending its presence to universities. In 1959, a new educational framework was implemented throughout the USSR, mandating the use of Russian as the language of instruction in the remaining Baltic states. This transition precipitated a gradual rise in the number of Russian-language schools catering to immigrants. Parents were afforded the choice to enroll their children in either Russian or non-Russian schools, with Russian being a mandatory subject in the latter, while in Russian-language schools, the native languages

of the Baltic peoples were offered as optional courses. This educational policy engendered significant discontent among the Baltic populace (Vorotnikov & Ivanova, 2019).

The imposition of the Russian language extended beyond the realm of education, encompassing governmental agencies and the judicial system. Notably, foreign Russians were accorded the privilege of not utilizing the local national language. This compulsory propagation of Russian language education exerted constraints upon the use of Latvian, Estonian, and Lithuanian, thereby fomenting heightened apprehensions within the Baltic community concerning the repercussions of Russian-language education on their linguistic and cultural heritage (Vihalemm & Hogan-Brun, 2013).

2.3 Baltic Road to Independence

2.3.1 Suppression, National Awakening, and the Path to Autonomy under Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union

In pursuit of augmenting their political hegemony within the Baltic region, both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union systematically stifled the evolution of Baltic native cultures, spanning domains encompassing language, cultural expression, beliefs, and psychological dimensions. Consequently, this orchestrated suppression engendered a milieu wherein robust foreign cultures encroached upon the limited space available for the preservation of the indigenous Baltic cultures. The burgeoning discontent among Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians germinated into a burgeoning sense of national identity, thereby kindling aspirations for cultural and national coalescence, ultimately culminating in their quest for independent nation-states. It is imperative to acknowledge that nationalist sentiments and the yearning for autonomous statehood had perennially simmered in the three Baltic states. Their native populations had been compelled to grapple with the dual exigencies of acquiescing to the dominion of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet government, while concurrently safeguarding the distinctive facets of their cultural heritage through diverse means. The 1950s and 1960s were marked by sporadic dissident activities directed against the Soviet Union, with Nikita Khrushchev categorizing these movements as intolerable instances of "local nationalism." Unlike Khrushchev, Brezhnev exhibited a

relatively more lenient stance towards nationalism. However, the policy of “Russification” remained unmitigated under his stewardship, with Russian-language education being promoted as a matter of paramount importance. This perpetuated a climate of discontent among the subject populations in the region (Johnston & Lieven, 1995).

The ascendancy of Mikhail Gorbachev to power heralded a transformative phase characterized by the promulgation of “reforms and new thinking” alongside an ethos of “openness and democratization.” Although Gorbachev initially prioritized political and economic imperatives, relegating ethnic issues to a peripheral status, his tenure fostered a more hospitable milieu for the proliferation and maturation of national independence movements across the Baltic region.

2.3.2 From 1980s to 1991: A Decade of Struggle, Sovereignty Declarations, and the Path to Freedom

In the late 1980s, the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—saw a surge in local organizations and political movements, like Latvia’s National Independence Movement and Estonia and Lithuania’s Popular Fronts, all pushing for national independence. These movements, fueled by a growing sense of national identity, demanded the end of the 1939 Soviet-German Pact that had placed them under Soviet control and sought the establishment of sovereign states.

Estonia led the way by declaring sovereignty in 1988, amending its constitution to prioritize local laws over Soviet ones. Latvia and Lithuania made similar declarations, emphasizing their historical status as independent nations and seeking future relations based on bilateral agreements. This period also saw the rise of anti-Soviet sentiments in publications and massive nonviolent protests, showcasing unity among the Baltic states towards independence.

By 1990, all three states had declared their independence, with Lithuania first, followed by Latvia and Estonia. Their push for sovereignty gained further international support, especially from Russia, with whom they signed treaties outlining future relations. However, Lithuania’s treaty came later, in July 1991, after economic disputes and violent incidents. A significant moment was the 1991 referendum on preserving

the USSR, which the Baltic states largely boycotted, showing their strong stance against Soviet influence. This period marked a critical step towards their eventual full independence, as they firmly rejected the Soviet Union’s attempts to maintain control over them (Vorotnikov, 2018).

3. Integrating and Securing: The Baltic States’ Path from Independence to EU and NATO Membership

After gaining independence in 1991, the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—faced significant challenges. These countries have diverse identities, seeing themselves as part of Europe culturally, politically, and strategically, but not in terms of foreign and security policies. They aimed to join the Western security community rather than the CIS, which represented the Soviet Union’s influence. Joining Europe’s security framework proved complex, with lasting effects (Ham, 1998).

3.1 *From Aspiration to Integration: The Baltic States’ Pathway to the European Union and Navigating Post-Accession Challenges*

The Baltic states’ main goal was to “return to Europe” and integrate with the European Union. They began EU membership negotiations in 1998 (Estonia) and 1999 (Latvia and Lithuania). In 2003, they signed the “Fifth EU Enlargement Treaty” along with other Central and Eastern European countries and officially joined the EU in May 2004.

3.1.1 Strategic Integration and Cooperation: The Baltic States’ Journey to EU Membership and beyond

During the initial phases of their EU accession negotiations, the European Union strongly encouraged Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to enhance their regional integration and cooperation. This encouragement was aimed at fostering a unified approach to their transformation processes and elevating their economic development to a more competitive level on the European stage. Responding to the EU’s directives, these countries diligently embarked on “sub-regional” collaborative initiatives within the Baltic Sea area, focusing on harmonizing their economic and social policies with those of the EU. This involved aligning their technical standards, trade practices, and legal systems with EU norms and making significant adjustments and reforms to their economic infrastructures to better integrate with

the European Union's internal market. Upon their accession to the EU in 2004, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania began to seamlessly integrate into the EU's single market, benefiting from the Union's uniform tariff system. The EU has, over the years, provided substantial financial support and loans to these nations, facilitating tighter bonds of exchange and cooperation among member states. This financial influx has spurred growth in the exports of the Baltic states' traditionally strong products and sectors, drawing substantial investments from Western and Nordic countries. Notably, infrastructure within these countries has seen considerable enhancements, underpinned by EU aid. For instance, between 2007 and 2013, Estonia received approximately 3.39 billion euros from the EU aimed at bolstering its economy, advancing educational initiatives, and environmental improvements. A significant project funded by the EU, which covered 85% of the investment, was the construction of the "Baltic Railway." This railway project, adhering to European standards, connects Tallinn to Kaunas, facilitating smoother passenger and freight movement across the Union (Česnauskė, 2019).

In the lead-up to and following their EU membership, the European Union has played a pivotal role in advocating for the improvement of the Baltic states' political and economic frameworks. This included pushing for enhanced democracy, the rule of law, human rights protections, and the respectful integration of ethnic minorities and marginalized groups into mainstream society. The EU particularly focused on the language policies of Latvia and Estonia, urging these governments to adopt more inclusive language policies to safeguard the rights of minority populations. In response, these nations have made concessions and adjustments in several policy areas to align with EU standards and expectations. Furthermore, the EU has required these countries to boost their national competitiveness, conform to new regulations, expedite administrative reforms, and heighten governmental operational efficiencies.

Following their integration into the EU, the Baltic states have progressively embraced the EU's core values, principles, and commitments, actively engaging in the responsibilities that come with EU membership. They have rigorously implemented EU policies, supported

the EU's expansion eastward, and contributed to maintaining the cohesion and unity of the EU. For example, Lithuania played a notable role in mediating the political unrest in Ukraine following the "color revolution" and has voiced strong support for Ukraine's EU accession aspirations. Since the onset of the Crimean crisis in 2014, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have aligned with the EU's stance by imposing sanctions on Russia and, in 2016, agreed to prolong these economic sanctions as part of the collective effort to address the geopolitical challenges posed by Russia (Gänzle, 2017).

3.1.2 Resilience and Adaptation: The Baltic States' EU Journey amidst Crises and European Identity Evolution

Before and after their accession to the European Union, the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—navigated through several significant crises, including the EU accession crisis, the global financial crisis, the European debt crisis, the refugee crisis escalation in 2015, and the implications of Brexit in 2016. Each of these events shaped and influenced the EU identity of these nations in distinct ways. The evolution of their EU identity can be segmented into three distinct phases: initial enthusiasm for rejoining Europe and active preparation for EU membership with optimistic expectations; a period of shifting perceptions due to the challenges of European integration and adapting to the process of Europeanization; and finally, a phase marked by rising Euroscepticism and populism, coupled with efforts to overcome their peripheral status within the EU and aspirations for a European renaissance. The financial crisis notably impacted the traditional export markets of the Baltic states within the EU and CIS, leading to a more pronounced economic downturn in these states compared to other EU regions. Lithuania was urged by the EU to align with the Stability and Growth Pact's standards, aiming to reduce its fiscal deficit to below 3% of GDP within a few years. Estonia's entry into the Eurozone in 2011, amidst the European debt crisis, was met with skepticism, as public opinion at the time suggested that only economically weaker countries would join the Eurozone, earning Estonia the unflattering nickname of "sitting on the Titanic." (Bohle, 2017)

Over the decade following their EU accession, the Baltic economies have grown increasingly reliant on external markets. This has led to the

erosion of traditional industrial advantages, heightened market competition, and amplified financial vulnerabilities. The economic model of these countries has exhibited pronounced extroversion, making them sensitive and susceptible to external economic shocks. Consequently, their competitiveness has waned, and the challenges to national governance have escalated. Regarding security—a paramount concern for the Baltic states—their participation in regional defense cooperation has intensified. However, the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) has struggled to provide substantial and effective military support. This gap underscores a critical area of concern for the Baltic states, reflecting on the broader challenges and complexities of aligning national security priorities within the EU's collective defense framework (Aidukaite, 2019).

3.2 Securing Sovereignty: The Baltic States' Strategic Shift from Soviet Shadows to NATO Membership

During NATO's expansion, Western political leaders drastically changed their view on including the Baltic states, initially seen as within the Soviet sphere of influence and not considered for expansion. Since gaining independence, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania rapidly pursued NATO membership, joining its "Partnership for Peace Plan" in 1994 and strengthening ties with the U.S., viewing it as a key ally against Russia. In 2003, Lithuania supported the U.S.-led Iraq war with humanitarian efforts. At the 2002 Prague Summit, NATO invited the Baltic states to join, and by 2004, they were official members, with NATO countries periodically patrolling their airspace. However, doubts persist about NATO's, led by the U.S., commitment to defending the Baltic states' freedom and integrity due to their limited military capabilities, differences within NATO, fluctuating U.S. foreign policies, and the U.S.'s strategic focus not fully shifting to Europe even after the Ukraine crisis, impacting the Baltic states' faith in NATO (Veebel, 2018).

3.2.1 Strategic Alliances and Independence: The Baltic States' Path from Soviet Occupation to Reclaiming Sovereignty

After the Soviet Union collapsed, Estonia strongly resisted the Russian military's presence, viewing it as a threat to national security. The nature of Estonia's relationship with Russia—whether seen as a friend or foe—has crucially

influenced its strategic stance towards Russia. In contrast, the Baltic states, including Estonia, have positive historical ties with the United States, shaped by their experiences of Soviet annexation and their subsequent regaining of independence. From 1940 to 1990, the United States, along with other Western countries, refrained from officially recognizing the annexation of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union. Throughout World War II, these nations predominantly opposed the Soviet military's occupation of the Baltic territories. Although the United States later acknowledged the Baltic states' incorporation into the Soviet Union due to post-war geopolitical realities, this recognition was not formalized through official diplomatic statements. The U.S. continued to recognize the diplomatic missions established by the Baltic states after their initial declaration of independence and offered asylum to a significant number of political dissidents and human rights advocates fleeing Soviet oppression, up until the Baltic states reclaimed their independence in the 1990s (Kaufman, 2012).

In the wake of growing independence movements within the Baltic states, amidst the transformative political landscape of Eastern Europe and the crumbling Soviet Union, the United States embarked on a policy of active intervention. In March 1990, Lithuania spearheaded the movement for secession from the Soviet Union, having secured implicit support from the United States in advance. Vytautas Landsbergis, leading the staunch nationalist group, emerged as a key figure in the independence movement, buoyed by comprehensive American support across various fronts. Despite the lack of formal American endorsement for the Baltic states' full independence prior to the August 19 coup attempt, the United States exerted considerable influence over the region's political developments. After 1989, the U.S. utilized diplomatic summit meetings, the extension of most-favored-nation status, and the imposition of sanctions to press the Soviet Union towards democratizing the Baltic states and renouncing the use of military force. Furthermore, the U.S. capitalized on Mikhail Gorbachev's intent to enhance Soviet-American relations and maintain a pro-Western image, significantly swaying Soviet policy decisions. This strategic American involvement played a crucial role in facilitating

the Baltic states' rapid and successful extrication from Soviet dominion (Kasekamp, 2020).

3.2.2 From Neutrality to NATO: The Evolution of the Baltic States' Defense Strategies and Strategic Alliances

Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty establishes a foundational principle for NATO, asserting that an attack on one member is considered an attack on all members, thereby authorizing collective defense actions, including military force if necessary. The defense strategy evolution of the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—can be delineated into three distinct periods: initially adopting a neutrality policy aimed at expelling Russian military presence and constructing national defense capabilities from the ground up (1990-1994); transitioning to a comprehensive defense approach by developing military forces capable of countering threats in alignment with NATO standards (1994-2002); and ultimately embracing a collective defense strategy focused on developing capabilities-oriented military power (2002-present). At the outset of their post-Soviet independence, the Baltic states aspired to adopt a stance of neutrality and non-alignment, akin to Finland and Sweden. Nonetheless, their strategic and vulnerable geographic positioning led them to conclude that NATO membership was imperative for ensuring their sovereignty and protecting national interests. Despite proposals for alternative security arrangements from Russia and some Western nations, the Baltic states pursued NATO integration, facilitated by a softening of Russia's opposition. Since joining NATO in 2004, these states have fortified their political and military alliances with the United States, participated in NATO-led military initiatives, shared military resources, and aligned closely with U.S. policy on key international issues. In 2013, the leaders of the Baltic states conducted a collective visit to the United States, underscoring their commitment to deepening these strategic ties (Veebel & Ploom, 2018).

Amid NATO's eastward expansion, the Baltic states advocated for an increased NATO presence in Central and Eastern Europe, eliciting a sharp response from Russia and contributing to the Ukrainian crisis and escalating tensions in the Baltic Sea region. During a 2014 summit in Tallinn, Estonia, President Obama affirmed the U.S. commitment to defend the Baltic states as part of collective defense, equating the security

of their capitals with that of Berlin, Paris, and London. The 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit further discussed the enhancement of military bases and capabilities in Poland and the Baltic region. Given their limited military capacity and the evolving nature of the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the Baltic states continue to regard the United States and NATO as the paramount guarantors of their national security (Bladaite & Šešelgytė, 2020).

4. EU and NATO Strategies in the Baltic Region: Evolution, Challenges, and Russia's Response

4.1 EU Defense Policy Evolution and Challenges in Baltic Security Cooperation with Russia

In the wake of the Kosovo crisis during the 1990s, European Union (EU) member states recognized the imperative need to enhance their collective defense mechanisms. The Helsinki EU Summit in December 1999 marked a pivotal moment in this regard, initiating the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), which was later subsumed under the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) as per the Lisbon Treaty. This shift underscored the commitment to establish an EU rapid reaction force alongside the development of novel defense and military cooperation frameworks. The 2009 Lisbon Treaty further delineated the EU's collective defense obligations. Despite these advancements, critiques have perennially labeled the CSDP as largely symbolic, highlighting its lack of autonomous military capabilities and assets. The EU's geographic and economic interdependencies with Russia have been a cornerstone in shaping its approach towards regional conflicts, fostering a preference for collaborative engagements over adversarial confrontations. Rooted in liberal principles, the EU's security paradigm has historically leaned towards a moderate stance on Russia, propelled by the belief in the transformative power of interdependence, democracy, and trade in cultivating peace and shared values. This ethos has informed the EU's strategy in the Baltic Sea region, aiming to preclude traditional military hostilities while bolstering regional cooperation and enhancing non-traditional security measures among member states (Vorotnikov, 2018).

Since the end of the Cold War, the EU has emerged as a more influential entity in global

affairs, championing the “European Idea” which advocates for normative, systemic, and legal resolutions to international disputes via political dialogues. The pursuit of a renewed EU-Russia relationship has been twofold: advocating for Russia’s transition towards a “Western-style” democracy through criticism on human rights and democratic practices, and simultaneously striving for a strategic partnership. This dual approach was exemplified by the signing of the “Russia-EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreement” in 1994, the establishment of four common spaces between Europe and Russia in 2003, and the formulation of the “Roadmap to the Future” plan in 2005, which sought to consolidate past achievements and set the stage for future EU-Russia relations. The overarching aim of the EU-Russia security dialogue has been to foster consensus on global concerns, thereby augmenting mutual security and stability (Vorotnikov, 2018).

Nonetheless, the EU’s identity as a normative power has often seen its influence in Baltic security affairs confined to non-traditional security and economic instruments. The effectiveness of the CSDP has been questioned due to its lack of a solid military foundation and the sensitive nature of defense and security issues, which involve national interests and often prefer unanimous intergovernmental decisions over efficiency. Concerns have also been raised about the potential impact of the CSDP on transatlantic relations, with countries like Poland and the Baltic states expressing apprehension, and Denmark opting out of the policy. These internal divergences underscore the challenges the EU faces in articulating a cohesive foreign and security policy.

4.2 NATO’s Evolving Security Strategy in the Baltic Sea Region: Expansion, Alliance Unity, and Containment of Russian Influence

In the period leading up to the accession of the Baltic states, NATO’s strategy was primarily focused on facilitating the region’s expansion. This involved supporting the Baltic states’ aspirations for independence and Western integration, aiming to address the security vacuum in the region and expedite the integration of Poland and the Baltic states into NATO. This strategy was intended to facilitate their transition towards Western political and economic systems while simultaneously containing Russia’s regional influence. Following the Cold War’s conclusion, Poland

and the Baltic states prioritized NATO membership as a key national objective. NATO’s decision to embrace these nations reflected a strategic intent to redefine its purpose, affirm the outcomes of the Cold War, and contribute to the vision of a “peaceful, free, and unified” Europe. Despite the limited military capabilities of the newly incorporated Baltic members, which prompted significant debate within NATO regarding the impact on the alliance’s defensive strength, the expansion was largely a political maneuver. Throughout this expansion process, NATO maintained a cautious approach towards Russia, seeking to avoid direct confrontation by expanding with Moscow’s implicit consent.

Following the Baltic states’ integration into NATO, the alliance’s security policy in the region transitioned towards ensuring the security of its new members, reinforcing alliance cohesion, and continuing to counteract Russian influence. The policies adopted by Poland and the Baltic states post-accession were characterized by a strong alignment with the United States, further European integration, and a defensive posture against Russia. Given their geographic proximity and historical experiences with the Soviet Union, these states have placed significant emphasis on NATO’s collective defense guarantees, expressing reservations about the European Union’s common security and defense policy. Their efforts to enhance NATO’s forward military presence and active participation in NATO operations, such as those in Afghanistan and Libya, underscore their commitment to contributing to the alliance beyond being mere security beneficiaries (KHUDOLEY & LANKO, 2019).

The inclusion of Poland, the Baltic states, and other Central and Eastern European countries has significantly influenced NATO’s strategic orientation. In response to their contributions and to solidify alliance unity, NATO has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to defending the Baltic Sea region, particularly in the aftermath of the Russia-Georgia conflict and the crisis in Ukraine. These events have shifted perceptions within NATO regarding Russia’s strategic intentions, leading to enhanced unity and strengthened defense postures in the Baltic region. Furthermore, NATO’s engagement with Sweden and Finland reflects a broader strategy to expand its influence in Europe and constrain Russia’s strategic options in the Baltic Sea,

underscoring the ongoing geopolitical dynamics in the region (Kurečić, 2017).

4.3 NATO Expansion and Russia's Geopolitical Strategy in the Baltic Sea Region

Spanning an impressive expanse across the Eurasian continent, Russia boasts a total area of approximately 17.0982 million square kilometers, of which 16.3777 million square kilometers are landmass, complemented by 720,500 square kilometers of aquatic territories. As of 2016, this vast nation generated a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of US\$3.745 trillion, with a population count nearing 142.3 million. Russia's substantial geographical reach, combined with its vast reserves of natural resources and formidable military capabilities, has historically positioned it as a pivotal player on the global stage, seeking to assert its influence as both a world power and a regional authority.

4.3.1 Russia's Geopolitical Strategy and Influence in the Post-Cold War Era: Balancing Power in the Baltic Region and beyond

After the Cold War, Russia's strategic objectives in the Baltic Sea area were primarily focused on retaining its sway within this crucial region, aiming to shape the decision-making processes of neighboring states. This strategic intent was also geared towards leveraging its position to facilitate its integration into the European framework. The Baltic Sea, a traditional portal for Russia into Europe, assumes a critical role in the nation's economic resurgence and its broader European integration efforts. During the pivotal period transitioning from the 1980s into the 1990s, as Poland and Finland pursued independent foreign policies and the Baltic states sought sovereignty, the Russian leadership under Yeltsin played a crucial role in providing essential political backing. Nevertheless, the dissolution of the Soviet Union heralded a phase of tensions between Russia, the Soviet Union's successor, and the Baltic states, characterized by negotiations over military withdrawals, the rights of Russian-speaking populations, asset distributions, and territorial demarcations. During this phase, Russia's engagement with the Baltic states was marked by a discernible coolness, contrasting with its warmer relations with the West, a dynamic often referred to as a "civilized divorce" prior to 1994.

The unveiling of NATO's eastward expansion strategy in September 1995 met with staunch opposition from Russia. An early 1997 security

report from Russia delineated a policy aimed at fostering neutrality within the Baltic states, alongside efforts to address the concerns of Russian-speaking minorities. Russia articulated apprehensions that NATO membership for these states would severely compromise its national security interests, disrupt economic and cultural ties with Kaliningrad, and strain relations with the Baltic states. In a pivotal move in February 1997, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced a comprehensive policy towards the Baltic states, emphasizing regional economic integration, bilateral cooperation, and the pursuit of peace and stability rooted in the principles of indivisible security, human rights, and the protection of minority interests. Russia's outreach included proposals for security assurances to the Baltic states, which were ultimately rebuffed, underscoring a persistent resistance to the incorporation of former Soviet territories into NATO—a stance that contributed to the Baltic states' initial exclusion from the alliance despite NATO's 1997 resolution to admit Poland and other nations.

In the early tenure of Vladimir Putin's presidency, a concerted effort was made to mend and enhance relations with the West and neighboring countries. Russia envisaged the Baltic states as conduits for fostering closer ties with Western Europe, advocating for amicable relations and neutrality to deter NATO memberships. Concurrently, the Baltic states moderated their anti-Russian rhetoric and policies in anticipation of joining NATO and EU, marking a period of relative progress in their interactions with Russia at the dawn of the 21st century. Despite these advances, debates regarding NATO expansion continued to dominate, with Russia persistently warning against the military and strategic imbalances such an enlargement would entail, positing it as a potential source of regional tension. Conversely, the Baltic states maintained that their NATO aspirations were not conceived as a threat to Russia, highlighting a persistent dichotomy in the geopolitical landscape of the region (Veebel, 2018).

4.3.2 Shifting Dynamics: Russia's Response to NATO Expansion and its Strategies in the Baltic Region Post-9/11

After the September 11, 2001 attacks, the relationship between the United States and Russia saw a notable shift, with Russian President Vladimir Putin showing a more

welcoming attitude towards the NATO membership aspirations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. This change was motivated by the belief that NATO's security promises could alleviate the Baltic states' deep-seated fears and defensive stance against Russia, potentially smoothing the way for Russia to integrate more closely with European economic and political frameworks. However, despite initial hopes, the security situation in the Baltic Sea region became more strained after the Baltic states, along with several other countries, were invited to join NATO at the Prague Summit in November 2002 and subsequently joined the European Union in May 2004. Following NATO's expansion, Latvia and Estonia upgraded their defense systems with TPS-117 radar and advanced fighter jets, prompting Russia to enhance its military presence near Baltic airspace in 2004. This led to the Baltic states requesting further NATO support for their radar and anti-missile defenses (Veebel & Ploom, 2019).

Russia also engaged in a broad strategy to maintain its influence in the Baltic states, using tactics such as propaganda, cyber attacks, economic pressure, and exploiting ethnic and social divisions. It encouraged Russian-aligned companies to invest in strategic sectors abroad, especially in the energy market, leading to European concerns about Russia using energy as a tool for political influence. Russia's interference in Lithuania's 2003 presidential election, particularly the scandal involving President Paksas' impeachment in 2004 due to ties with Russian interests, highlighted its willingness to meddle in the domestic politics of the Baltic states (KHUDOLEY & LANKO, 2019).

Furthermore, Russia has actively worked to prevent Sweden and Finland from joining NATO, concerned about the security implications for its borders. A simulated Russian attack on Sweden in 2013 and Putin's warning to Finland in 2016 about the consequences of joining NATO reflect Russia's strategic efforts to safeguard its interests in the Baltic Sea region. Russia's post-Cold War strategy in this area aims to preserve its strategic interests and dissuade NATO expansion towards its borders through a mix of diplomatic, military, and covert actions.

5. Challenges and Prospects in Russia-Baltic Relations: Navigating Historical Legacies and Geopolitical Dynamics

Since the Soviet Union's dissolution, Russia and

the Baltic states have transitioned from a phase of "civilized divorce" towards pragmatic cooperation, albeit without achieving robust neighborly relations. This dynamic is shaped by several factors, both hindering and facilitating closer ties.

5.1 Russia's Evolving Policy towards the Baltic States: Strategic Adjustments in the Post-Soviet Era

The 1997 policy document titled "Russia's Long-term Policy towards the Three Baltic Countries" meticulously articulated Moscow's regional ambitions and strategic directives. This document aimed to establish a coherent and strategic foundation for Russia's interactions with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, outlining a broad spectrum of interests ranging from political engagement to economic collaboration and security considerations. Despite the clarity of intent expressed within this policy framework, its practical implementation has been significantly hampered by ongoing preoccupations, notably with the Baltic states' NATO membership and the contentious issue of the rights of Russian-speaking minorities residing within these countries. These concerns have consistently diverted attention and resources away from the broader strategic objectives initially set forth, resulting in a piecemeal approach to policy enactment (Lamoreaux & Galbreath, 2008).

Following the accession of the Baltic states to EU and NATO, a notable shift in the geopolitical landscape necessitated a reevaluation of Russia's policy stance. However, such an adaptation has not been forthcoming, leading to a policy framework that appears increasingly anachronistic and ill-suited to the complexities of the current geopolitical environment. This stagnation in policy evolution can be attributed, in part, to the influence of domestic interest groups within Russia, whose priorities and agendas have contributed to a fragmented and inconsistent approach towards the Baltic region. This lack of cohesion and strategic alignment underscores a broader challenge in Russian foreign policy: the difficulty in achieving a balanced and coordinated strategy that addresses the unique dynamics at play in each of the Baltic states. During Boris Yeltsin's tenure, the political landscape profoundly influenced the nature of Russia's economic engagements with the Baltic states, with bilateral economic relations being closely intertwined with the political rapport between these nations. This

period was marked by a degree of volatility, reflective of the broader transitional phase that characterized post-Soviet geopolitics. Transitioning into Vladimir Putin's presidency, there has been a discernible shift in the dynamics governing Russia's interactions with the Baltic states. While political considerations continue to play a significant role, there has been a relative decrease in direct political interference in non-strategic economic domains. Nonetheless, the Russian government has maintained its emphasis on the issue of Russian-speaking minorities, persistently linking this matter to negotiations surrounding border treaties. This stance highlights the continued prioritization of geopolitical and security concerns, even in the context of bilateral economic relations (Ciziunas, 2008).

The period preceding the Baltic states' accession to NATO was marked by a heightened focus on the implications of NATO expansion, reflecting broader concerns about the alliance's eastward movement. Post-accession, the dynamics of Russia's relationship with the Baltic states have been further complicated by their integration into the EU, necessitating a shift in the framework within which political, economic, and social negotiations are conducted. Relations in these domains are now situated within a specific Russia-EU framework tailored to the Baltic states, whereas discussions pertaining to military security are increasingly channeled through a distinct Russia-NATO framework. This bifurcation in the negotiation channels underscores the multifaceted nature of the challenges and opportunities that define the current state of Russia-Baltic relations, highlighting the intricate interplay of regional and international factors in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Baltic Sea region (Lamoreaux, 2014).

5.2 Entrenched Divides and Prospects for Reconciliation: Navigating the Complex Relations Between Russia and the Baltic States

The demographic composition of Latvia and Estonia, characterized by a significant Russian-speaking minority, coupled with political hesitations regarding the extension of automatic citizenship, has entrenched a scenario where the amelioration of the status of Russian speakers appears to be a distant reality. This issue is exacerbated by the Baltic states' collective memory of Soviet occupation, a period marked by repression and Russification efforts,

fueling a quest for "restorative justice" that remains a divisive topic in Russia-Baltic relations. Russia, for its part, struggles to align with this historical interpretation, viewing it as an oversimplification that overlooks the complexities of Soviet-era policies and the interwoven histories of these nations. Moreover, the political landscape within the Baltic states is influenced by factions that leverage an anti-Russian stance as a means to consolidate their influence. By casting Russia as the perennial antagonist, these groups aim to galvanize public support, often at the expense of nuanced diplomacy and constructive engagement with Moscow. This dynamic serves to entrench mistrust and animosity, further complicating the prospects for reconciliation and cooperative relations (Fierman, 2013).

Despite these challenges, there are underlying dynamics that could potentially foster a more harmonious relationship between Russia and the Baltic states. Russia's strategic vision of fostering long-term cooperation with Europe identifies the Baltic states as crucial conduits for dialogue and interaction between Russia and Western Europe. This perspective is not unfounded, given the geographic and economic ties that bind these regions. Areas such as energy supply, transit transportation, and regional economic development emerge as arenas for potential collaboration, offering mutual benefits that could serve as a foundation for improved relations. However, the realization of such cooperation is contingent upon addressing the contentious issue of the rights and status of Russian-speaking populations in Latvia and Estonia, as well as acknowledging and respecting Russia's interests in the Baltic Sea region (Raik, 2016).

In essence, navigating the path towards establishing genuinely friendly relations between Russia and the Baltic states is an endeavor fraught with historical grievances, political machinations, and socio-economic considerations. While there are avenues for cooperation that could potentially bridge divides, the journey towards such an outcome is complex and requires a concerted effort from all parties involved to confront and resolve the deep-seated issues that have historically marred their interactions.

6. Conclusion

The Baltic states' journey from the shadows of

Soviet influence to the forefront of European integration and security cooperation stands as a testament to their resilience, strategic vision, and commitment to the principles of democracy and collective defense. Through their accession to the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have not only solidified their place within the Western geopolitical landscape but have also contributed significantly to the stability and security of Central and Eastern Europe.

This article has traced the multifaceted path of the Baltic states towards EU and NATO membership, highlighting the profound political, economic, and social reforms undertaken to align with European standards. Their integration into these institutions has bolstered regional stability and underscored the importance of adherence to democratic values and the rule of law. Furthermore, the Baltic states' evolving relationship with Russia, marked by periods of tension and diplomatic engagement, remains a critical aspect of their geopolitical strategy, reflecting the broader challenges and opportunities inherent in post-Cold War European relations.

In conclusion, the Baltic states' trajectory post-Cold War exemplifies the transformative power of European integration and alliance-building in fostering secure, democratic, and prosperous societies. As they continue to navigate the complexities of international relations and regional security, the experiences of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania offer valuable lessons in resilience, diplomacy, and the pursuit of collective goals. Their journey underscores the enduring significance of the EU and NATO in promoting peace, stability, and cooperation in an ever-evolving global context.

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