

THE BALTIC STATES BETWEEN THE OLD AND NEW EUROPE. THE BENEFITS OF LISBON TREATY FOR LITHUANIA, LATVIA AND ESTONIA

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Abstract: The Baltic countries have joined the European Union in 2004. The attraction toward EU is mainly due to their external relation with Russia and to the fact that the three countries have been dominated by Russia for centuries. In 1991, the Baltic countries became independent and since then they held to the so-called “return to Europe” and “separation from Russia”. The current European situation is the following one: the new Europe challenges the old one. The Baltic States, once inside the European Union became a voice in the present European politics and they hoped to receive a prize as compensation for all they have suffered throughout history because of Russia/USSR. As a benchmark for their goals, the Baltic States have clung to the Lisbon Treaty, which they have seen as a way to resolve their past and present problems.

Key words: returning to Europe, Nord Stream project, European Union, communism, European tiger

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The Baltic States were interested in the European Union, even before the Union was set up, starting with the period it was only a project. This appeal of the Baltic States was especially due to their external relations with Russia, to the fact that the three countries had been

dominated by it for several centuries. In 1990, Lennart Meri (former Estonian President) – then foreign minister of the still Soviet Estonia – wrote that “Europe is to the Estonians more than only a geographical concept. Europe is our programme. Not because we regard ourselves as better Europeans than the Finns, but because we know what the price is of being absent from Europe.”¹

In the year 1991, the Baltic States became independent and since then there has been a process of what has been called “returning to Europe” and “departing from Russia”.²

¹ Leonidas Donskis (ed), *The Baltic States and Their Region: New Europe or Old?*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005, 94.

² Iris Kempe, “Filling in a strategic white spot on the European map”, *Russia, the EU and the Baltic States*, http://www.fes-baltic.ee/public/Tekstid/Russia_the_EU_and_Baltic_States.pdf, 20.11.2010.

Because of the communist rule, the Baltic States lacked stability and administrative ability and had problems on the internal and external level, and the means of solving this situation was seen by the three countries as being the western one.

The picture of “returning to Europe” was rejected by the Balts³, the reason being the fact that it shows them as imitators of the West, and not as equals. The states that entered the Union in 2004 were regarded “as countries lagging far behind the former western countries in terms of their development and... as an incomplete copy of a West which it must still aspire to follow.”⁴ This way, the Baltic States fought to take this term out of the political discourse. At the same time, they were rejecting the term “transit-country”, “which label the new members as humble followers and imitators of the old western European countries.”⁵

The European situation is the following: the new Europe is a challenge to the old one. The Balts do not want to be perceived as inferior to the West but wish to be equal and, in this respect, they become a voice in the present European politics. In their eyes, *returning to Europe* supposes a division between East and West, which means an unequal perception of the countries, while the *New Europe* must be a model of unity and prosperity.

The question that follows is: if this classification of types of Europe stands, then how is Europe united if even the terms related to it divide it? How do post-communist countries find their places in Europe?

The Baltic States find themselves in a position in which they are trying to find their own place and role within the great European community. Membership in the EU and NATO have balanced out the asymmetry in Baltic-Russian relations, but in the same time the European Union has changed from being a space to which the Balts want entry, to being an idea which they want to influence.⁶

Once they entered the EU, Estonian prime minister Juhan Parts argued in 2004 in an interview with the newspaper *Postimees* that the greatest danger for Estonia had now become “marginalization in the European Union and in NATO as well. I mean a situation where we are only formal members.”⁷

In this way, for the Balts, contributing to the EU has become a new future-orientated national programme, their aim being the fight for: the equality of all member-states, economic growth in global markets, enlargement of UE⁸, relations with the Russian Federation and enhancing the EU’s and NATO’s capabilities as international actors.⁹

A given situation is that the Baltic States are especially concentrating on the past. The loss of nation-statehood through the Soviet annexation has violated the national dignity and has remained a national trauma. Over the years, this trauma of the past has been revived by the same activator. Real security concerns were determined by Russia’s unwillingness to remove military forces from Estonia and Latvia until August 1994 and August 1993 for Lithuania.

³ Donskis, *The Baltic States and their region*, 87.

⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁵ *Loc. cit.*

⁶ *Ibid*, 97.

⁷ *Ibid*, 98.

⁸ *Ibid*, 101.

⁹ David J. Galbreath and Ainius Lašas, *Continuity and Change in the Baltic Sea Region: Comparing Foreign Policies*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008, 127.

Later, Russia had a political discourse that was dangerous for the security of the three states. This discourse culminated with Putin's declaration in 2005, in which he stated that the greatest strategic catastrophe of the XXth century was the crash of USSR.¹⁰ The words have caused the continuation of the acute tension between the two parts and have confirmed, to the Baltic States, the way that Russia views the former soviet states. Thus, they were more eager to draw near to the EU and to discredit Russia, influencing public opinion regarding this country.

In this context, as an illustration, it is adequate to remind the association made by the Estonian President, Toomas Hendrik Ilves. He consciously employed Huntington's notion of the conflict of civilizations when he described the Estonian-Russian boundary as a fault-line between the West and the East.¹¹

Because of this external pressure, the Baltic States have especially focused on a politics of security, which they have developed through different projects and propositions. The Latvian Foreign Policy Directive Project 2005-2010 calls for focus on regional Security and The Lithuanian Parliament's Resolution on Directions in Foreign Policy calls for the government to 'continue expanding the zone of security and stability in the region'.¹²

At the same time, through the fact that they adhered to the Union, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia hoped that they would receive a check in white as compensation" ¹³ for all that they suffered throughout history from Russia / USSR and that they would be protected against it.

Speaking in Sigmund Freud's terms, this Acting-out trauma, which means the living of the past in the present, explains why the events of the crucial years 1939-41 have been the subject of such intensive study in the newly reborn republics and why the period of interwar statehood has been elevated to the status of a new Golden Age defining the present, too.¹⁴

In this way, the Baltic States try to revive the glorious period through the creation of a new political and social identity (western and transatlantic) and through creating a new image in the European frame. The Balts have succeeded in building a strong national self-esteem, through the image of a strong market economy, high technology and ultra modern architecture, contrary to Russia's image of pollution, poverty, orthodox church and Soviet legacy.¹⁵

The model of a strong economy has been the one of the USA and of other countries that have had an extraordinary ascension. The Balts have perceived themselves as "Tigers of Europe" a term which refers to the Asian examples of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore and the EU's "Celtic Tiger," Ireland - at the point when their economy had developed very much within 2000-2007. Even if the development of the last ones have been more advanced than of the Balts, "Tiny Tigers will always be Tigers", said Kristiina Ojuland, Estonia's former Ministry of foreign affairs.¹⁶

Despite all this, the Baltic Tiger proved to be an illusion. In 2008, the economic growth slowed down in all three Baltic states (due to global financial crisis), with Lithuania's real growth rate falling to 3.0%, Latvia's -4.6% and Estonia's -3.6%. As the global financial storm swept across Eastern and Central

¹⁰ Tomas Janeliūnas, "From the editor" in *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review No. 24*, 2010.

¹¹ Donskis, *The Baltic States and Their Region*, 95.

¹² Galbreath, *Continuity and Change in the Baltic Sea Region*, 125.

¹³ "EU, Russia: Moscow's Expectations and the Lisbon Treaty" in *Stratfor*, 18.11. 2009.

¹⁴ Donskis, *The Baltic States and Their Region*, 88.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 103.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 100.

Europe, the Baltic states' economies have been especially hard hit: Estonia's GDP (gross domestic product) dropped by -16.2% year-on-year, Latvia's by -19.6% and Lithuania's by -16.8%. By mid 2009, all three countries were experiencing one of the deepest recessions in the world.¹⁷

By adhering to the Treaty of Lisbon, the Baltic States have strengthened the politics presented here, the treaty having an essential role for the Balts because it included security policy as their focus. More than that, something important was introducing the obligation of co-operative defense, the member countries being obliged to offer support through all possible means, to a state which falls victim to an aggression. Another important issue is stipulating that a cooperation would be intensified between certain states that have the same interest regarding common defense, which means, in fact, the possibility of some states to take the initiative and to protect the Union's values on account of it.¹⁸

Another reason that has made the Baltic States enthusiastic about the treaty has been the including of a protocol related to the problem of energy, and this is a vital subject for the three states because of the fact that they are dependent upon Russia as concerns their energy, and as neighbors, they are part of the route for transporting the natural gases to the west and are against the building of a new factory of atomic energy in Russia. One of the projects that the Baltic States opposed the most has been the Nord Stream project, which proposed the extraction of petrol from Russia and its transportation to the west, through the Baltic Sea. In the context of Lisbon's treaty, Latvia's president at that time, Valdas Adamkus, declared:

*...our shared responsibility must also include environmental protection and climate change. The Baltic Sea region is among the most vulnerable in the context of climate change, while the inland Baltic Sea is seriously threatened by large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Nord Stream and rapidly increasing oil tanker traffic. We cannot allow the Baltic Sea to become a "new Bosphorus": with large amounts of dumped chemical munitions any incident at sea may result in an ecological disaster, causing irreparable damage to the entire region. It is important to ensure the highest possible standards of environmental protection against any off-shore and on-shore economic activity.*¹⁹ (29.04.2008, University of Tallinn)

Nord Stream represents a major offshore gas pipeline across the Baltic Sea that aims to directly connect the Russian Federation to Germany. In September 2008, the Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin announced that five EU member states would receive natural gas through the pipeline: Germany, France, Great Britain, Holland, and Denmark. The Baltic States being excluded from the project and at the same time being concerned about their energy security, criticized the project on environmental grounds.²⁰

Not in the least, the Lisbon treaty also stipulates the prosperity of the UE citizens and the fighting against poverty through article II, paragraph 5, (second

¹⁷ Aaron Eglitis, "Latvia's Economy Contracted Record 19.6%", 10.8.2009, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=a8U0aGhDyw68>, Bloomberg News.

¹⁸ Arūnas Molis, "The Baltic States: How to guarantee collective security in the 21st century?" in *Baltic Review*, 16.06.2010.

¹⁹ Valdas Adamkus, "The Baltic States in a Changing Europe: Our New Roles and Responsibilities", 29.04.2008, <http://archyvas.lrp.lt/en/news.full/9006>.

²⁰ Adrian Gheorghe and Liviu Muresan, *Energy Security: International and Local Issues, Theoretical Perspectives, and Critical Energy Infrastructures*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2011, 341.

article, fifth paragraph) and the Baltic States in deep financial crisis following the extraordinary development in 2000-2007²¹ found this treaty supportive.

The Lisbon treaty has been ratified on the 8th of May, 2008, by Lithuania and Latvia. In Lithuania there were 83 votes for, 5 against and 23 abstentions, and in Latvia 70 votes out of 74 were for. Estonia ratified it a month later, on the 11th of June.

The Baltic States have been oriented towards the UE politics since 1991; however, they have had certain expectations, which were very well defined. They were hoping that their history would totally change with the help of the Union and that there would be a compensation for their troubled past, a thing for which they asked publicly many times; their accusations have been directed towards Russia. At the same time, there has been a phenomenon of the Baltic States perceiving themselves as victims of the past, that is why nowadays these states are working so that communism may be regarded as equal to Nazism. In this respect, the Baltic states are the promoters of an educational programme in which they bring out common textbooks, in which a “common history” would appear, having the aim to overcome the mental barrier created between Eastern and Western Europe.²²

As a landmark for their political, economical and social aims, the Baltic States have clung to the *Lisbon Treaty*, which they looked at as a means of solving their past and present problems. On the other hand, the European Union have been attentive regarding their politics towards the Baltic States, as for the Union they mean an open door to establishing relations with the former communist countries and, at the same time, a geo-strategic point.

Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are a sort of hinge-states, social mediators which open the doors in both directions. Having gone through de-Sovietization, democratization, and marketization, the Baltic States can provide a successful example of post-Soviet transition that will increase engagement and further integration for other similar states. As highlighted by an official in the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, simply being in the region makes a difference, as in the case where the Latvian embassy in Minsk was used by the Austrian EU presidency in 2006 to engage with Belarusian authorities and so on.²³

The Baltic States have each expressed support for increased engagement with the countries of the post-Soviet area: Ukraine, Georgia, Moldavia and also with Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan. At the same time, through this pressure for the integration of those countries, the Baltic States are conscious that they weaken Russia's influence in those areas.²⁴

Peter van Ham, Director of Global Governance Research was asking “is geography destiny?” We may say that the Baltic area is a possible conflicting area and has proved to be like that throughout history, being geographically situated near a great power. Despite this, the idea of geography as destiny may have a positive significance, which means that exploring the geography of the Baltic States may provide an open door to another world that is less accessible

²¹ Carolyn Bain, *Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*, Oakland: Lonely Planet, 2009, 27.

²² Carlos Closa Montero (coordinator), *Study on how the memory of crimes committed by totalitarian regimes in Europe is dealt with in the Member States*, Madrid: Institute for Public Goods and Policy Centre of Human and Social Sciences, 2010, 364.

²³ Galbreath, *Continuity and Change in the Baltic Sea Region*, 128.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 130.

to the Union. The area may also be redefined as one of mediation between East and West. Latvian foreign minister Valdis Birkavcs declared in his speech “Between Europe and Eurasia” in Houston, Texas in April 1998: “We are the synapse between two worlds.”²⁵

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²⁵ Donskis, *The Baltic States and Their Region*, 95.