

Baltic regional co-operation

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Abstract

Ke státům, které se opět objevily na politické mapě v roce 1991, patří Estonsko, Lotyšsko a Litva. Při úsilí o mezinárodní uznání v posledním desetiletí 20. století se pobaltské státy musely vyrovnat s několika úkoly, jako jsou redefinice třístranné pobaltské spolupráce, rozvoj vztahů a spolupráce mezi severskými a pobaltskými státy v celém prostoru Baltského moře a otázka integrace do EU a ostatních mezinárodních organizací. Předmětem zájmu této práce jsou tyto dva rozdílné, ale přesto vzájemně propojené aspekty spolupráce: geografická identita a regionální identita, který zmapuje vývoje vzájemných vztahů Estonska, Lotyšska a Litvy v různých oblastech spolupráce a zhodnotí jejich významu pro vytvoření regionální identity.

Key words: Baltic States, Baltic region, Baltic Triangle, co-operation, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, regionalism, identity.

Today we are seeing a return to the pattern of earlier times when the Baltic States participated fully in the political, economic and cultural life of Europe. It is of great importance for the Baltic three to be treated as European states again. The well-known historian Gert Pistohlkors held the point of view that the Baltic region was a part of Latin Europe - it was built upon the foundations of the Mediterranean cultures of antiquity. The towns around the Baltic Sea as the members of the Hanseatic League acted in the trade between East and West.¹ In the inter-war period, the Baltic States belonged to the political and economical structures of Europe.

The term 'Baltic region' can be used either widely, to define all the nations and regions bordering the Baltic Sea, or narrowly, to define the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In this paper I will focus mainly on the co-operation policies of the Baltic States.

Since the declaration of independence in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, the persistent question of the foreign policies of the three countries has been the direction and policies of integration. Looking forward to their international identity, the three Baltic States are being faced

¹ Pistohlkors, G.: *Regionalism as a Concept of Baltic Historiography, Regional Identity under Soviet Rule*. Conference 1985.

with a triple challenge: the redefinition of trilateral Baltic cooperation; the development of Nordic – Baltic relations; and their integration with the EU. Re-defined trilateral documents indicate movement in all these directions.

This article is dealing with the “Baltic Triangle“ and my aim is to clarify emerging trends in the political, institutional and economical co-operation between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

As paradoxical as it might seem, the Baltic States have always been perceived as a united entity, or as a region, more by the outside world than by the Balts themselves. They are like “three sisters” whom you do not choose and whom you are destined to live with, whether you like it or not.

The fact is that after regaining their independence the three Baltic States have not had a plan for integrating with each other or with the region. The strengthening of their individual sovereignties, and the re-establishing of the attributes of individual states, have not created a favourable environment for close regional co-operation. When the independence fever lost its strength, the politicians became more active in their attempts to establish closer relations in the Baltic region. First steps have been taken, but the discussions continue: Can one even consider the Baltic States as a region and does it, as a region, have a future?

To answer the above questions we should first make an attempt to define what a regional identity actually is.

Each scientific discipline concerned with the problems of man and territory has developed rival concepts of regionalism.

The main idea of almost all of them is that regions can be looked upon as geographical, political, social, economic and cultural entities which share a similar system of values and standards, and which are radically different from other territories.

Clearly, regions are numerous and varied, they do not all have all of the above mentioned features. One feature may dominate; another may be rather weak or not exist at all. Regions may be large or small; they may be represented by different geographical territories within a single state, or alternatively they may unite either parts of several states or the states themselves.

Regionalism and regional co-operation can also be defined using other perspectives, such as historical experiences or suffering similar problems in a certain geographical space. In addition there might be extensive interaction between state and societies through institutions sharing

common rule. One of the key defining characteristics of a region is the feeling of “*belonging together*” and that its residents have a sense of regionalism.²

Different interpretations can be given also to the Baltic region and to the Baltic State region, but each of them covers a particular aspect of reality. Here I would like to look at the following two aspects of the Baltic three:

- as a geographical identity,
- as a region with its own identity

As a geographical identity

The three Baltic States are geographically situated on the Baltic Sea shore. They are very close to each other and are all small countries, Estonia with 45 227 km² and 1 4763 inhabitants, Latvia with 64 589 km² and 2 5017 inhabitants, and Lithuania with 65 301 km² and 3 7119 inhabitants.³

In the 20th century these states were wedged between two regional superpowers in the region: Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.

Geographically the Baltic States can also be considered as a part of Baltoscandia introduced by geographers from Sweden, Estonia, and Lithuania in 1933-1940. One of the most characteristic features of the Baltic States' geographic position is that they are situated by the Baltic Sea and that, geographically speaking, they apparently belong to the region of Nordic countries. The Estonian Prof Kant considered the Swedish geographer Sten De Geers' idea of Baltoscandia, where all the three Baltic States were geographically united with the Scandinavian countries, to have great validity. He added support to this idea and made the concept of Baltoscandia widely known. The Lithuanian geographer Prof. Kazis Pakshtas also found the term Baltoscandia to be appropriate to define the position of the Scandinavian and Baltic countries on the map. He even developed the idea of Baltoscandia by introducing his own classification of the region in question adding certain anthropogeographic criteria such as a zone of Nations of

² For a discussion see: Řířhová (2002, 9–35); Nye, (1968, 855–880); Raagmaa, (1997, 89); Cottey, (2000, 23–47); Wagstaff, (1999). Švec, (1996). Kadeřábková (1996). Hnřzdo, (1995). Keating and Loughlin, (1996). Rebas, (97/98, 67–76). Kaslas, 1976; Rokkan, and Derek, (1983).

³ The number was taken from: Agenda 2000, Commission opinion on Estonias application for membership of the European Union, Bulletin of the European Union, Supplement 11/97. Agenda 2000, Commission opinion on Latvias application for membership of the European Union, Bulletin of the European Union, Supplement 10/97.

Predominantly Northern Character, a zone of Western Christianity, a region of seven smaller languages and smaller nations of common Cultural Interests and Sympathies.⁴ In his article “Back to Baltoscandia? (European Union and Geo-Conceptual Remaking of the European North”) in 2003 Moisijs once again returns back to this point of view.⁵

As a region with its own identity

What upholds a region’s identity is a most sensitive and controversial question, which has gained a political character. No doubt, till today there still exists a keen feeling of regained sovereignty. Academics and especially politicians in the Baltic States are claiming that there is little in common between the Baltic States as far as their culture, language, and traditions are concerned. On the other hand it can also be argued that we should develop closer relations with the neighbours sharing our joint region; it is perhaps more “healthy” to concentrate on aspects which unite rather than those which differentiate.⁶

Nevertheless, looking at the Baltics from a distance gives the impression that the three nations live very close to one another.

Social-historical factors to consider include:

- The ancestors of modern Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians settled on the shores of the Baltic Sea more than four – (five) thousand year ago.
- There is a split in the languages of the Baltic three: Lithuanian and Latvian belong to the Baltic group of Indo-European languages, Estonian is a Finno-Ugaric language.
- During the reformation, Estonia and Latvia adopted Lutheranism, while Lithuania remained Catholic.

Agenda 2000, Commission opinion on Lithuania's application for membership of the European Union, Bulletin of the European Union, Supplement 12/97.

⁴ See more in: Pakštas, K.: *The Baltoscandian Confederation*. Litva 1940. Litva 1942; Kant, E.: *Baltoscandia*. Tartu 1936– 1937.

⁵ Moisijs, S. (2003): *Back to Baltoscandia? European Union and Geo – Conceptua*. *Geopolitics*, Vol. 8. No. 1/2003, p. 72–100.

⁶ Prof. Robert Putnam from Harvard University Putnam argue in His articles in *Postimeses* that it is more “healthy” to concentrate on aspects which unite rather than those which differentiate.

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- Latvia and Estonia shared a common fate being both for a long time (12-18th centuries) sometimes partly, sometimes entirely under the rule of Germans, Swedes, or Poland, while Lithuania's historical path differed. It was in Union with Poland.
 - In 1710-1795 the historical paths of the three small nations crossed; they were incorporated into the Russian Empire.
 - WWI caused a sudden strengthening of the independence movements of the subjugated nations. In 1918 all three nations declared themselves independent states. (Estonia and Lithuania in February, Latvia in November).

Till now we have been dealing only with the Baltic nations and the territories occupied by these nations (except Lithuania).

In the inter-war period, when the Baltic countries came into existence as independent nation-states, the concept of Baltic States (Region) came into existence. The term "Baltic States" began to be more and more frequently used.

The first attempt at co-operation was when Estonia supported Latvia in its fight against the common historical enemy German Landeswehr in 1919. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania also had many common features during the inter-war period:

- all of them had created independent states
- were recognized by the world
- improved their national economies
- established active foreign relations
- were also a buffer zone between Soviet Russia and Western European countries, like Finland, and Central-European countries.

In the early 1920s there was a theoretical possibility of close co-operation between the three Baltic States:

- in 1921 they concluded a convention on post, telegraph and telephone services
- in 1923 the Estonian- Latvian League was formed
- in 1923 Latvia and Estonia signed a railway convention and in 1923 the two republics signed an agreement on taxation of transit ships in the ports of Estonia and Latvia
- in 1924 a convention on the organization of fishing and fish protection was concluded

On the other hand, there were, at the same time, border disputes between Estonia and Latvia; and, since Poland had conquered Vilnius, Lithuania was reluctant to accept Estonia's good relations with Poland.

It can also be said, that any Baltic co-operation has always been dependent on external factors. Their co-operation increased in the 1930s when Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union tried to define their spheres of interest. After Germany and Poland signed a non-aggression treaty in January 1934, Lithuania's international position became more complicated and on September 12, 1934 the Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania was signed in Geneva closer co-operation in economic and cultural fields as well as for regular conferences of their foreign ministers and consultation on foreign policy. The signed treaty did not lead to a common regional security system.

The idea of the Baltic Treaty was particularly easy to be implemented due to their geographical unity, and the similarity of their demographic and political situations in the early 1930s. However, the sharpening of divergences between the great powers again started influencing Baltic foreign policy. Despite the endeavours of Baltic politicians to reinforce Baltic co-operation it was falling apart and the attempts were too weak to withstand Soviet annexation in 1940 of all three together. For the following 50 years the three countries were in a common historical system, with the Soviet Union applying regionalism "à la Sovietique" by force.

During the Soviet time, the Baltic people always kept solidarity between themselves in Gulag camps (as Solženicyn in his famous book). It was the sense of "belonging together" as former free nations. We should not forget to mention that the co-operation of Baltic emigrants spread all over the world, united by their strong desire to see the Baltic States (region) free from the Soviet regime.⁷

The new basis for Baltic co-operation was created in late 1988. There was a unifying factor: the struggle for independence. Estonia was the first to hoist its national flag in April, two

⁷ From 1946 to 1949 existed in Germany Pinnenberg the Baltic University. Moreover The Joint Baltic American National Committee, Inc.(JBANC) was founded in 1961 to support restoration of independence, human rights and democracy to the Baltic countries. (Today, JBANC has adapted to the changing needs of the Baltic peoples and the Baltic communities in the United States. JBANC acts in a dual capacity as the liaison of the Baltic communities with Capitol Hill and the White House as well as the information agent to the parent organizations. See also: Open letter from the Estonian SSSR (1980) and The Baltic Appeal of 1979. In: Jurnal of Baltic Studies (JBS) Vol XVII No. 3, Fall 1986, pp. 292-296 and pp. 289-292. The Joint Baltic American National Committee, Inc.(JBANC) was founded in 1961 to support restoration of independence, human rights and democracy to the Baltic countries.

months later Latvia and Lithuania followed her example. The three nations also adopted an agreement on common goals. It can be said that Baltic unity under the conditions of the occupation was very close. For instance, the Baltic republics were together in their fight for sovereignty inside the USSR and their actions were more united and their understanding of their common identity was more powerful. A strong legal opposition emerged in the form of local Popular Fronts in all the Baltic States. Its culmination was on August 23, 1989, during the 50th anniversary of the today well known Hitler – Stalin pact: in 1989 from Tallinn to Vilnius, a human chain was formed with more than two million people who joined hands demanding freedom for the Baltics.

In March 1990 Lithuania declared its independence, Estonia and Latvia introduced a period of transition on their “step by step” secession from the Soviet Union. The first acts of foreign policy of the States were the establishment of horizontal ties with each other in the form of Declaration on Unity and Co-operation between Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia signed on May 12, 1990.⁸

The August putsch in Moscow in 1991 accelerated the process of secession of the Baltic States. After declaring their independence, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania signed between themselves a large number of agreements in various fields.

Next, we can look at the fact that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania clearly chose to rejoin the community of democratic European states and that joining the EU and NATO was the priority of their foreign policy. But we can see that going on separate roads towards this aim would have taken much longer than co-ordinating their political activity. Moreover, Lithuania continued to focus much of its foreign policy along the Warsaw-Washington axis, whereas Estonia continued with its Helsinki-Brussels orientation. By contrast, despite some support from Scandinavia, Latvia lacked an advocate that could play a role similar to that of Poland and Finland for Lithuania and Estonia respectively. Its society and business class remained divided on the question of the country's western political orientation. As a result, Latvian foreign policy was likely to be pursued with less conviction than that of Lithuania and Estonia at the end of the 90s. The development of a Latvian defence lag in the Baltic region would have adversely affected the efforts of all three states to move closer to NATO membership.⁹

⁸ This was, in effect, the restoration of the Declaration on Friendship and Co-operation of May 12 1934.

⁹ For discussion: Zájedová, I. (2006): *Pobaltská regionální spolupráce*. Prague, Charles University Press, p. 154-164.

Pressure was applied by the closest Nordic neighbours and International Organisations and it was important that the Baltic States applied pressure together, through their common institution: the Baltic Assembly.¹⁰

So, motivated by inner necessity and outside pressure, the Baltic States began to set up joint initiatives. In the early 90s co-operation began on an institutional level. Naturally (and unsurprisingly) the Baltic States decided to adopt the model of the Nordic countries.

The co-operation between Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as sovereign states went on at several levels: regular meetings of the Heads of the Baltic States, representatives of the Baltic governments, Ministers of Foreign Affairs (The Baltic States Council), parliamentary delegations (The Baltic Assembly), meeting of the three Baltic Prime Ministers (The Baltic Council of Ministers). Since 1993 the Baltic three share a common visa area and Free trade agreement. They also discussed together the question of taking a further step towards the establishment of a visa-free regime with the Nordic countries.

One definite integrating factor existed in the early 90s: the continuing presence of Russian troops in the Baltic States (till August 1994) - one of the most pressing aspects for national survival and security. The concentration of political efforts on this issue strengthened co-operation between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

In the 90s the Baltic three made a common appeal towards the withdrawal of the Russian Army from the Territories of the Baltic States and they elaborated the common standpoint in their relations with the former Soviet Union and Russia. In March 1995, the three Baltic Ministers of Defence signed a trilateral agreement, which set forth the principles of defence co-operation. The Agreement covered co-operation in such areas as relations with the UN, NATO and EU, development of the armed forces. A significant part of the co-operation activities related to the so-called multilateral security projects – BALTBAT (Baltic Peacekeeping Battalion), BALTRON (Baltic Naval Squadron), BALTNET (Baltic Airspace Surveillance Network), and BDC (Baltic Defence College).¹¹

¹⁰ The Second Baltic Assembly. *Baltic News: Information and Analysis*, June, no. 2, 1992 p. 5

¹¹ See: *Balti Riikide Sõjalise Koostöö Projektid (1994–2000)* and *Bajarunas (1995)*.

Further problems arise from the fact that the Baltic States are competing among themselves when it comes to involvement in Western structures. On the one hand, this competition serves to promote development; on the other hand, the competition sometimes becomes irrational, because it affects reactions by Western politicians and institutions. For example, only Estonia was included in the first wave of EU expansion and the American expert Z. Brezezinski claimed in the fall of 1998 that only Lithuania was ready for NATO membership. Both caused confusion in the relations among the Baltic States.

The main factor which seems to unite the Baltic states was, and still is, the fear of being swallowed by a big neighbour such as Russia. That is why the first joint actions were taken in the field of security (military co-operation, knocking at NATO`s door, the first joint Baltic „, peace keeping“ battalion etc.)

Another factor is the common (more than forty years) destiny, common legacy and heritage of the Baltic Three as “Sovietskaya Pribaltica“ in the Soviet Union. As former Soviet republics, they had similar problems such as economic difficulties, growing unemployment, lack of fuel and natural resources, decline in production, ecological problems, problems of development of culture, science and education. They shared a lack of experience in the management necessary for a market economy. All this pleads in favour of finding a common solution and actions. Practically, it has already resulted in a common visa and Free Trade area, and common efforts to co-ordinate foreign and security policies.

One more factor, which falls into a combination of outlooks:

– “from inside“:

Here we can speak about one of the necessary characteristics of any region as a sense of regionalism of its residents. Consequently the question arises whether the Baltic people have this sense of “belonging together“. Even being so sensitive towards the sovereignty issue, the Baltic nations would hardly deny their feeling of belonging to the “Baltic three“.

– “from outside“:

This is the outlook of the rest of the world. The Baltic States are usually looked upon as a regional entity by politicians (the EU and Nordic countries would like see the Baltic states

united): by businessmen (an integrated Baltic market with around 7,5 mln. consumers seems to be more attractive) and even ordinary people.

The main factors which hinder Baltic co-operation is the factor of sovereignty. For a long time the Baltic states have struggled for their identity and independence. Therefore, all questions related to these matters are still very sensitive. This explains the reluctance of the Baltic States to delegate even a part of their sovereignty to a joint power of supranational nature, which could effectively co-ordinate the process of co-operation and lay a basis for a future integration. There are certain joint institutions, but it has to be admitted that as yet they are not efficient.

Again history replays itself, repeating what happened during the inter-war period when the Baltic States did not succeed in co-operating constructively.

One can mention the sea border dispute between Latvia and Estonia which threatened to flare into a fish war or the dispute between Latvia and Lithuania over oil-drilling in the Baltic sea which is also a part of a border issue between these countries, or the inability of Latvia and Lithuania to agree on their policies towards refugees in the region.

We have to admit that problems separate as well as bring together. Anyway, these particular conflicts have settled. And even when Latvia threatened to go to the international court, the other Baltic countries agreed that the conflict should have been settled amicably. The case became one of the issues to be discussed at the Baltic Assembly, although unfortunately the Baltic parliamentarians failed to find a solution.

Its influence had also political and economic factor. The difference of the political situation and views in the Baltic States make it difficult for them to find common ground. This was the case in 1992 after the elections in Lithuania when power went to the leftists, making an excuse for the right wing conservative government of Estonia not to sign the Baltic Free Trade Agreement. There was a difference in economic development between the Baltic Three. Each government has its own idea on the ways in which its country should develop. The leftist nature of the Lithuanian government was not the only reason for Estonia's declining to sign the Baltic FTA. In 1992 this country was considered the most successful in its economic reforms and it did not want to shatter its stable position due to the Free Trade Union with Lithuania lagging behind.

In conclusion I would like to say that, the preconditions of the possible Baltic co-operation seem to be favourable, and the countries do have a basis for co-operation. The Baltic States form a harmonious and definite geographical unit, extending from the gulf of Finland to the Lower Nemunas, constituting to some extent a political, economic and cultural alliance.

Certain steps have been made towards each other, but problems still exist. Most Baltic politicians have realised the necessity of the Baltic co-operation. But although there is a good will to co-operate, it has not as yet been very constructive; the Baltic States have not used the whole potential of the above-mentioned favourable preconditions for co-operation. This can be explained by the absence of ability to influence mutual behaviour and the diverging interests of the individual Baltic States. Hence, the central role in the Baltic States co-operation is played by national institutions.

A former Latvian president told the Baltic Assembly that it was high time to overcome the national egoism of the Baltic Three when solving mutual problems and to define the form of unity the Baltic really wants to achieve. But nevertheless, and notwithstanding these criticisms of the Baltic cooperation, one has to admit, that today it has reached a level that it has enjoyed never before.

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