

Ghent Russia Colloquium: 'EU-Russia Relations: How to get out of the 'mid-life' crisis?' Topic: Shared neighbourhood and regional integration

### **De-securitising Russia-West relations: the case of the Baltic countries**

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#### **Introduction**

Since the start of the Ukrainian crisis, relations between East and West became worse since the end of the Cold War. Russia's intervention in Ukraine resulted in mounting concern by all its western neighbours, prompting Belarus to balance between Russia and the EU, decisively ruining relations with Ukraine, and bringing the Baltic states to securitise their eastern flank, and to request more NATO security guarantees. While the worst seems to have passed, the relationship continues to be strained, which is why to find and foster areas of cooperation for building trust anew may lead to improve EU-Russia ties, building trust from the bottom-up, from everyday security practices.

However, to do so, Russia's place vis-à-vis the West has to be defined. Is it engaging with an out-right external power? Or are there grounds for arguing of security interdependence, however limited? This paper aims to roughly actualize the conceptualization of the Baltic states in regards to their Regional Security Complex membership, in order to suggest which regional patterns of securitisation define their own security dynamics. This theory's emphasis on the regional level of analysis, and on territoriality, brings forward the enduring security interdependence between the EU and NATO's 'eastern flank' and the former Soviet Union region (FSU), particularly concerning Russia. This inquiry requires problematising both the concept of the Baltic states as fully integrated into the complex of western European security concerns, and stressing their continuous interdependence with the FSU security complex. To suggest which items comprise that latter security agenda is beyond the scope of the present inquiry.

#### **Securitisation of Russia: fluctuations before and after 2014**

Since the collapse of the USSR, the foreign policy aim of the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) has been to decisively distance themselves from Russia. In regards to security, joining the EU and NATO were seen as thresholds for removing Russia from their agendas. However, in spite of accession, Russia remains to be perceived as a threat, both real and with the potential of worsening. This perception became further consolidated after the 2008 war between Georgia and

Russia, and then in 2014 after Russia's intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, which compelled the Baltic states to increase security guarantees in regards to a possible Russian intervention similar to that in Ukraine (Jakniunaite, 2016, 7-8). This consolidation of security concerns towards Russia is in the context of the Baltic sea region, where, due to the diversity of security strategies and the lack of convergence all across the sea's rim, conflict among states remains possible, and peace unconsolidated (Mödel, 2011, 161). Nonetheless, there has been an evolution in this perception, which indicates that threat perception in the Baltic states is persistent but contingent.

Between EU and NATO accession and the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, the Baltic states continued to have Russia in their security agendas, but not as an immediate existential threat. Rather, Russia's asymmetrical relationship with the Baltic states was seen as a fixture, an unavoidable reality to work with. Reflecting this, their citizenry did not assign an overwhelming importance to defence matters, having societal cohesion as a relatively higher concern. However, in the aftermath of the 2014 events in Ukraine, the perception of an existential threat coming from Russia in the Baltic states' populations increased, coinciding with their countries' elites calls for their extra-regional partners to increase security guarantees to protect territorial integrity, permeating, and overshadowing other security concerns (Jakniunaite, 2016, 8, 12, 21). This was a period of intense re-securitisation of the relationship, where an existential threat coming from Russia was perceived as the most urgent one, though not because of a change in Russia's policy, but because of the context produced by the intervention in Ukraine (2016, 19).

Since then, there has been a structurally-defined security dilemma between the Baltic states and Russia. On the one hand, since 2014 the three Baltic states increased their defence budget, vowing to meet the NATO requirement of 2 per cent of GDP. On the other, Russia has not integrated itself into a Baltic sea-centred security mechanism, a pan-European one, nor defined its identity in regards to its relationship with its neighbours. Indeed, it continues to allege that NATO is its main existential threat. This divergence is a missed opportunity for reducing the threat perception in both sides (Mödel, 2011, 158-159).

Nonetheless, it is possible to argue that this period of intense fear of Russian aggression peaked in 2015, being then followed by a concern on 'soft' ways of Russian interference, having the 'information security' sector becoming a particularly important one (Jakniunaite, 2016, 22-23). Indeed, opinion polls show that residents of the Baltic states continue to assign greater importance to matters other than national security, with an overall improvement in the feeling of security since 2014 (The Baltic Times, 2017). While these variations happened in the context of a relationship that remains securitised, the evolution in security concerns points to the possibility of improvement.

## **Conceptualizing the Baltic sea security architecture**

The multiplicity of security arrangements in the Baltic sea region offers a challenge in how to conceptualize, in a generalizing manner, the security dynamics concerning all the countries involved. Indeed, the patterns of institutional membership, cohesion with extra-regional actors, and identity regarding belonging intersect in producing a region that has not converged or integrated itself in such manner that conflict is prevented by structural constraints. Securitisation theory is chosen from the outset as the main framework, as it offers a way to conceptualize perceptions as subjective, socially constructed, and in terms of their security consequences. It also offers an framework to understand fluctuations in such perceptions; instead of objective, consistent security concerns, securitisation offers the possibility of accounting for contingency, and short-term change (see Buzan, B., Wæver, O., de Wilde, J., 1998).

In order to conceptualize the relationship between the Baltic states and Russia, a proper level of analysis has to be found. A comparative approach to bilateral relations may produce a more nuanced approach in evaluating the possible developments in the relationship, but does not necessarily lead to a generalizing assessment of the region's dynamics as a whole. A global level of analysis would produce a view too distant to address national or regional developments and perceptions as drivers of policy, as well as reduce the agency of local actors in favour of larger, extra-regional powers (*pace* Volovoj, Batorshina, 2016, 19-20). Between these two options, a regional level would better demonstrate the embedded intersecting securitisation patterns (Buzan, B., Wæver, O., 2003, 27-30), as well as inform collective decisions that encompass the security architecture of the whole region. This way, territoriality acquires more importance, allowing for an analysis of securitisation dynamics built around neighbourhood. Following Buzan and Wæver (2003), this work will also conceptualize the area as one where the dynamics proper to a Regional Security Complex (RSC) are in place.

The production of RSCs puts emphasis on geographical proximity, particularly on the patterns of security interaction, and, most crucially, interdependence. In the aggregate, securitising processes will manifest themselves according to regional patterns. This means that countries will take closer attention and give greater priority to their immediate neighbourhood than to faraway menaces, compelling alliances and pursuing balance of power on the sub-regional level. Then, RSCs are not arbitrarily defined groups of countries, but rather are a complex of security concerns revealing consistent, durable rather than permanent, patterns of interdependence with some extent of geographical continuity. However, as the borders of the RSC define the limits to shared security concerns, and threat perceptions by the state actors inside it (Buzan, B., Wæver, O., 2003, 35-36,

45-51), to suggest the borders for such RSC becomes necessary for identifying shared patterns of securitisation. Nonetheless, these borders fluctuate, often having hard borders only where 'insulator states' act as a hard border (2003, 41). Furthermore, the power dynamics within the RSC are crucial to understand its patterns of securitisation, as larger powers will have a disproportionate influence over the regional agenda, and the shaping of the shared threat perceptions (2003, 46).

This produces two determining factors: a relative autonomy of RSCs vis-à-vis outside powers in regards to their autochthonous patterns of amity and enmity, and a high power threshold for countries to peer outside of their immediate security concerns. Only superpowers, and great powers to a lesser extent, are able to direct their interest beyond their immediate region (2003, 55-56). This means that multilateral organizations and foreign policy shifts cannot decisively change the nature of a country's regional security concerns, as these are already determined by the RSC's internal power dynamics. Furthermore, different RSCs, even if sharing a border, will be exclusive to one another. Nonetheless, RSCs may change their boundaries and relationships to other RSCs. One RSC may integrate other RSCs, merge with them, or divide itself, or realign its internal dynamics (2003, 48, 50, 53). Furthermore, a distinct dynamic between powers and weaker countries is 'penetration': this happens when an outside power, great or super, involves itself in regional disputes, often at the invitation of local actors. This implies an alignment of security concerns across RSCs. Nonetheless, the effects of their involvement is never sufficient to alter the patterns of securitisation and rivalry, which remain autonomous (2003, 44-47).

This frame of analysis, applied to the Baltic states in light of their relationship with Russia brings the question of what are the borders of the RSC they belong to, and whether their institutional membership has overridden their own, state-born security concerns. The main question to answer in regards to the Baltics' securitisation of Russia is whether it belies interdependence in the realm of security, or whether they could effectively succeed in abandoning a Moscow-centred RSC.

### **Development of the sub-regional dynamics**

Since Buzan and Wæver's 2003 book, the analysis of the sub-regional dynamics in the Baltic region merits updating, taking into account recent events. The aim is to evaluate whether the conclusion made in 2003 still stands in 2017:

With de-escalation and even desecuritisation it is quite likely that the Baltic states will edge westwards and eventually join the EU-European RSC. However, a conflict scenario is a possibility and, at the opening of the twenty-

first century, the Baltic states *are* in the Russia-centred RSC irrespective of how much they dislike this (2003, 415).

Is this still the case? To be able to produce a decisive conclusion a deeper inquiry would be needed (see Buzan, B., Wæver, O., 2003, 73), but the contours of an answer may already be suggested. Are the current tensions between the Baltic states and Russia happening as an intra-RSC conflict, or as a meeting point for two distinct RSCs?

As mentioned in the quote above, up until recently, the Baltic states were still within the FSU RSC. The crucial factor in the relationship between Russia and the Baltic states is the asymmetry between them. This is typical of the RSC of the FSU, which has been one centred around the security concerns of the various Moscow (or St. Petersburg) polities. So far, its evolution has been determined by the extent of Moscow's reach and power vis-à-vis its neighbours, and the capacity of the smaller countries to interact with other regions, most often with the intention of balancing against Moscow's reach. During the Cold War, Europe, both central and western, was an area in overlay, meaning that it was penetrated by outside powers' to such degree that their local security dynamics were suppressed (Buzan, B., Wæver, O., 2003, 63, 397). In the case of the Baltic states this would be even a stronger effect, due to their lack of independence at the time, they were simply integrated into the USSR, negating the participation in the kind of security dynamics proper to a state in a RSC (2003, 401-402). The collapse of the USSR brought the Baltic states back into the dynamics of a RSC, although first within that of the one centred on the Russian Federation. As mentioned in the quote above, by the beginning of the 00s, the Baltic states were still within such RSC, with the asymmetric relationship with Russia still dominating their security concerns, but approaching the west with the aim to integrate themselves into it. In the meantime, they act as an intermediate area between, and an arena for the West and Russia (2003, 429).

However, we can see that the Baltic states may no longer be possible to be classified within the FSU RSC *tout court*, as westwards security integration has indeed deepened since. From the perspective of the outside powers, both Russia and the West (the EU and NATO) have had different results in their engagement with the Baltic states, having the question of membership of the Baltic states present for both sides. On the one hand, joining the EU, the Eurozone, and NATO are, among other things, successes of Western soft power. Russia, on the other hand, has failed in exerting soft power effectively in the Baltic states, though within the broader line of its consistent soft power failures (Urnov, 2014, 320). In general, has pursued its relations with its immediate neighbourhood through the lens of the so-called 'near-abroad', which has been pursued through multi-lateral organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security

Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). These have been able to exert some attraction towards some FSU countries, but a complete failure in regards to the Baltic states, which are not part of any of them. The outcome, is that the recent deepening of security guarantees for the Baltic states within NATO, may be interpreted as the emergence of them as an area where the traditional security concerns of the West have consolidated, which could not be said ten years ago (see Buzan, B., Wæver, O., 2003, 368).

Nonetheless, caveats remain. To interpret that the Baltic states are part of the European RSC *tout court* would also be a mistake. Not only Russia remains a crucial security concern for the Baltic states as mentioned above, but Russia's policies towards the region continue to have an disproportionate impact, owing to the asymmetry in the relation which remains, in spite of westwards integration. In this sense, the Baltic states remain involved in the FSU RSC in *negative* terms (Buzan, B., Wæver, O., 2003, 430-431). Deepening of the integration with the West has blurred those grounds for RSC membership, providing assurances, and having Russia's place as a security concern in a fluctuating position. However, integration has not resulted in a harmonization of security dynamics between the West and the Baltic sea region in general. As mentioned above, the security architecture of the Baltic sea region remains diverse, and has not integrated into Europe's larger 'post-modern' security architecture. Instead, modern, hard security guarantees, brought in for defensive stance vis-à-vis Russia, have had a defining place for the Baltic states' interest in integration (see Mölder, 2011, 159-161). Opinion polls conducted pre-NATO accession show the crucial role of security guarantees in the Baltic states interest in membership, but in membership in the organization as a defensive grouping, as the 1999 Kosovo intervention actually *reduced* support for NATO membership (Das Kundu, 2003, 478).

In general, between East and West, it may be possible to evaluate a third option for interpreting the Baltic states' RSC membership: a northern Europe sub-complex. Indeed, within such sub-RSC, traditional security and defence concerns separate northern Europe in what Mölder (2011, 151-152) suggests as four levels of RSCs in the Baltic sea rim: a Nordic complex (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden), a Baltic one, a 'Nordic-Baltic' one, integrating the two former, and a broader Baltic Sea complex, integrating all the former as well as Germany, Poland, and Russia. These intertwining security concerns have not given rise to a shared security community, much less to an institutionalized, normative peace, but to a RSC, where security concerns, particularly between Russia and the Baltic states, continue to call for multi-lateral, extra-RSC intervention. In the case of the Baltic states, and Poland, this has resulted in pursuing both integration, and balancing power vis-à-vis Russia (2011, 153, 156). These arguments, of Northern Europe as an un-integrated arena of western security architecture in general, and that in particular

the Baltic states as having primarily 'modern' security concerns (about Russia) instead of the 'postmodern' ones of the European core, suggest qualitatively different RSC dynamics than the rest of the European countries. Then Baltic sea region is better understood as a sub-region of the European core (2011, 154).

In particular, the integration of the Baltic states into the West challenges the assumption that 'small' states would simply be subsumed into western security architecture, losing a substantial part of their agency in international affairs. Indeed, the Baltic states have demonstrated capacity to pursue their foreign policy goals beyond EU or NATO membership. A shortcoming of RSCT is that it would posit that, as the Baltic states are 'smaller' than the EU, they should align themselves with an outside power and be content with their alliance, without having a proactive role in setting the agenda. However, they have striven to have such role, even determinant one in regards to the shared EU foreign policy (Lamoreaux, Galbreath, 2008, 6). Since their integration, organization membership has amplified their foreign policy capacity, by offering them economies of scale, and convergence with the larger interests of the other member countries, while obtaining security guarantees from NATO. This has been used, for instance, to pursue democratic promotion in other former Soviet countries. This way, it may be said that, despite their size, and the constraints of a common European foreign policy, they have been able to have a proactive role within the organizations they have joined (2008, 8-11).

As a preliminary conclusion, it can be said that the liminal condition of the Baltic states in regards to the European core remains in spite of integration. In such space, their security concerns remain connected with the FSU RSC and the broader northern Europe sub-complex, and in it, their foreign policy retains a degree of autonomy, as well as the capacity to influence Europe-wide policy. The difference in the context for security policy for the Baltic states compared to that of the 'post-modern' core Europe also intersects their securitisation of Russia, which opens challenges and opportunities visible through the regional level of analysis.

### **Towards a shared security agenda**

The intermediate and undefined position of the Baltic states opens challenges, such as the difficulties to harmonize and fully integrate them into Europe's security architecture, but could also offer opportunities for engaging Russia. As the case of the de-securitisation addressed above, however small, of Russia by the Baltic states shows, the perception of threat coming from Russia is a strong driver for policy, but not the ultimate concern, nor an overwhelming fear trampling other issues. Furthermore many of the everyday security concerns of the Baltic states links them to Russia. Not only in the negative, existential sense mentioned above, but also in a *positive* security

agenda, including issues such as arms and human trafficking, which are a continuous concern and area of cooperation with Moscow (see Lamoreaux, Galbreath, 2008, 9). However, this is conducted outside of a 'Western' security framework, rather depending on regional or bilateral venues.

## **Conclusion**

Giving preference to the regional level of analysis allows an analysis of the drivers and perceptions of the Baltic states vis-à-vis the West and Russia, as well as assigning agency and recognizing the weight of the Baltic states' diplomatic successes. However, some conditions endure. Becoming part of the European 'core' did not overcome the Baltic states' liminal condition vis-à-vis the larger West-European security architecture. Both traditional, 'modern' security concerns remain in the Baltic states (and the Baltic sea in general), as well as interdependence with an extra-EU power, Russia, albeit mostly in a negative way.

To conclusively suggest the RSC membership of the Baltic states would require a larger inquiry, however this theory-driven, top-down, deductive inquiry shows some characteristics for the region that are crucial for understanding the possibilities afforded by its embedded security architecture. For the Baltic states, it is possible to say that out-right membership into the West-European 'core' RSC has not been accomplished, but neither can it be said that instead there continues to be full security integration with the FSU RSC. Agreeing with Mölder, it may then be suggested that Northern Europe is part of a broader European RSC, but has sub-regional dynamics, which introduce nuance in the evaluation of the northern European countries' membership, potential or achieved, in the broader European security complex. Furthermore, the emphasis on territoriality and proximity bring forward the possibility of a shared security agenda with the Russian Federation, to be pursued in the frame of regional security, in an arch between Europe and the FSU. In turn, this would be a venue for de-escalation and de-securitisation, first by turning the securitisation of Russia from being a theatre of global conflict into a regional one, obeying regional dynamics, and then build up the relationship from the integrative shared security concerns.

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