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THE BALTIC STATES AND THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP: A STRENGTHENING FACTOR FOR REGIONALISM?

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When newly arising challenges constantly threaten to divert European capitals' attention from the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP)¹, the position of three Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – remains unshaken. Such solidarity and assistance to democratic reforms can be compared to one of Nordic states, which invested a great deal into the post-Soviet transformation of the Baltics. However, the Baltic states' engagement into the EaP region, which often includes criticizing Russia, is more complex than a policy of 'giving back'. The article takes a closer look into the role the Baltic States play in the EaP region, with particular attention to Ukraine. In addition to estimating the Baltic support, the main aim is to assess the impact that active involvement and transfer of the best reform-related practices to the EaP countries has on the Baltic States. It will also evaluate the hypothesis that the Baltic States' actions in the EaP region strengthen them as a region.

The restoration of independence of the Baltic States in 1990/1991 and their accession to the EU/NATO in 2004 are both watershed events that shape popular understanding of how far the three countries have gone - and how far they still have to go. Their progress is often credited to intra-regional cooperation, while existing competition, which is a strong motivator to do more and surpass one another, is little known. Comparing the Baltic development with that of their EU counterparts, the further North and West one looks, the more unfulfilled potential is detected at home

By contrast, the EaP target countries remind of what might have happened if political unity and will for a democratic and liberal economic transition had not been found.

Currently, the Baltic States are among the strongest supporters and contributors to the EaP countries' reform processes and their ambitions for closer cooperation with the EU and NATO. Such involvement strengthens their image as a trustworthy partner and neighbour and also witnesses their transformation from a recipient to a provider of international support, including political, economic and expert assistance, among others. But does this also strengthen the Baltics as a region?

The Baltic States as a Region

The understanding of the Baltic States as a regional unit is influenced by historical events and daily life perceptions. Interestingly, it is not necessarily the Baltic States themselves

¹ The EaP region encompasses the following six countries that are part of the EU's Eastern Partnership programme: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

that encourage understanding them as a regional unit. Instead, they pragmatically and selectively refer to themselves as Baltic when it delivers concrete benefits, for example, when advocating for common interests within the EU and NATO, but they



as the Baltic states were an example to be followed in Soviet times, their post-1989 evolution is also appealing to the EaP region

do not do that when other relations are seen as more influential. Estonia, for example, seeks to leverage its advantages in economic growth and the IT sector to portray itself as a Nordic country.

During the Soviet period, the Baltics were known as Pribaltika, or the “countries by the Baltic Sea.” They were idealized for their economic development and quality agricultural and industrial products. As a result, other Soviet republics wished to emulate their example.

In the West, there was relatively little attention paid to the Baltic States until their Singing Revolution and the 1989 Baltic Way. The latter - a chain of 2 million people connecting Vilnius, Riga, and Tallinn - once again intertwined countries’ destinies. This time, however, it resulted in liberation and return to the family of democratic European nations.

The EaP countries are able to relate to both interpretations of the Baltic states. Actually, they complement each other: just as the Baltic states were an example to be followed in Soviet times, their post-1989 evolution is

also appealing to the EaP region. Moreover, common history, which is not limited to the Soviet period but reaches back to the years of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which encompassed the lands of what is now Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova and which, from the 13th to the 18th centuries, fostered the development of societal links, that currently serve as a strong link for transmitting Baltic experiences. In case of Ukraine, the country reaches out and accepts Baltic assistance in seeking closer ties with the EU and NATO.

In addition to the mentioned EU and NATO platforms for cooperation, the Baltic States also use Nordic-Baltic Eight (NBB8) or e-PINE formats. The latter in addition to the five Nordic countries includes the U.S. Furthermore, during its Presidency, Latvia promoted the idea of a Euro-Atlantic Eastern Partnership, which would involve such third countries as the U.S. and Japan.²

The Baltic States within the EU’s Eastern Partnership

Though official initiators of the Eastern Partnership were Poland and Sweden, the Baltic States have always been strong supporters and advocates for greater EU engagement in the EaP region because of the following factors. Strengthening democracy in the EaP region was perceived as the best way to ensure stability and security. Experiences of the Baltic States demonstrate that EU-dictated reforms via ‘carrots and sticks’ have the strongest success rate in achieving democratisation. Second, Russia’s continued approach towards the post-Soviet space as the area of its influence is a common problem. Thus, assistance to the EaP region does not only limit the reach of Russia but also increases regional security by expanding the boundaries of

² Diana Potjomkina, “A More Geopolitical Eastern Partnership: U-Turn or “the Ladies Not for Turning?””, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Report, November 2015, http://liia.lv/site/docs/Eastern_Partnership_Diana_Potjomkina.pdf

democratic countries together as well as lessens the influence of Russia to the East. Third, as previously mentioned, the Baltic States and the EaP region have elements of shared common past from which a feeling of solidarity arises. For example, many Lithuanians were present at the Maidan to repay support that was expressed by Ukrainians during the acts of civic resistance in 1991 that became known as the January Events. In general, the Baltic States relate well to the EaP countries and it is in their interest to see the EaP region advanced and successful.

Both Lithuania in 2013 and Latvia in 2015 used their Presidency in the Council of the EU (hereafter – Presidency) to prioritise EU engagement in the EaP region. Estonia, which is to assume the Presidency in the second half of the 2017, has also pledged



The Baltic States are still investing into themselves and cannot be expected to donate as much as rich countries like Sweden

to do the same. During each of the Baltic Presidencies, the EaP Summits took place. The 3rd EaP Summit in Vilnius was a historic one, with Georgia and Moldova initialling their Association Agreements (AA), including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) treaties, with the EU. Moreover, and most importantly, the Summit marked the beginning of what soon happened to be the end of the President Viktor Yanukovich's rule in Ukraine and a change of the country's geopolitical orientation towards Europe. The 4th EaP Summit in Riga took a closer look at the other three EaP countries without AAs in force, and offered alternative agreements to Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as additional cooperation possibilities to Belarus. The 5th EaP Summit is to take place under the

Estonian Presidency in November 2017. During Lithuanian Presidency, the EaP Civil Society Conference was organized for the first time and later continued by Latvia. Estonia is to follow the tradition and to host the 3rd Conference. The first EaP Youth Conference was also initiated by Lithuania and then continued by Latvia. (However, the next one will be held in Warsaw in June 2017, outside the auspices of the Estonian Presidency.

During their Presidencies, the Baltic states facilitate numerous processes focused on deepening EaP countries' engagement with the EU. Ministerial meetings are used to assess and further assist the adoption of EU regulations, while such events as the EaP Business Forum are organised to boost EaP economies and attract additional support. Spurred on by the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Latvian Presidency distinguished itself by hosting the 1st EaP Media Conference, which addressed the danger of Russian language media channels that intentionally or unintentionally broadcast Russian propaganda, and called for greater support for independent journalism in the EaP countries. The event will be followed up by a 2nd EaP Media Conference in Kyiv, held under the Estonian Presidency.

Even outside the six-month Presidency term, the Baltic States are constantly vocal about the events in the EaP region. They criticize Russia for non-compliance with the Minsk Agreements, remain among the strongest advocates for continuing sanctions against Russia, and actively support Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine. In addition, the Baltic States offer various training programmes either bilaterally or within the framework of NATO. The Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade, operationally ready since 2016, acts as a sign of security commitment and interest to reform Ukrainian military by making it interoperable with NATO forces.

Many experts within the Baltic States are involved in assisting the EaP countries. The Estonian government even established the

Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership to provide training programmes to EaP officials and civil society and to promote EaP-related issues. In Latvia and Lithuania local think tanks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and educational institutions fulfil such functions.

Bilateral Support for the EaP Countries: The Case of Ukraine

Based on how actively the Baltic States advocate within regional and international formats for the EaP countries and their societies, it can be assumed that their political support is of greater significance than the financial one. The Baltic States are still investing into themselves and cannot be expected to donate as much as rich countries like Sweden, whose official development assistance (ODA) in 2015 reached 1.5 percent of its gross national income (GNI) or USD 7.09 billion, or Germany, which donated 0.53 percent of GNI or USD 17.78 billion. Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian ODA totalled 0.15 percent, 0.09 percent and 0.11 percent of GNI respectively.³ As a result, the Baltic States aim to optimize and channel their development cooperation assistance funds to areas of common interest with a possibility to transfer their transitional experiences and success stories.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, the country's budget for development cooperation and humanitarian aid for Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and

Ukraine in 2016 consisted of EUR 3.32 million. Estonia's bilateral development cooperation with Ukraine in 2015 amounted to EUR 998 779.⁴ In 2015 Latvia devoted EUR 644 250 to Ukraine of which EUR 150 000 went to international organisations and foundations supporting the country. An additional amount of EUR 161 278 was given as humanitarian aid.⁵ Lithuania's bilateral development assistance in 2015 accounted for EUR 8.3 million, most of which was given to the EaP countries. Also, EUR 400 000 out of EUR 600 000 for humanitarian aid were earmarked for Ukraine.⁶ Projects for development of cooperation and democracy promotion implemented in Ukraine in 2015 accounted for EUR 356 000, while in 2016 there was an increase to EUR 452 000.⁷

A great part of Ukraine-focused development cooperation projects funded by the Baltic States prioritise actions contributing to the implementation of the Association Agreement. Particular attention is given to good governance and strengthening the rule of law, economic development (especially of regions), development of civil society, and education. Estonia and Latvia allocate a significant share of their assistance to Chernihiv oblast, where Latvia facilitates region's territorial reform and municipal cooperation, while Estonia focuses on environmentally friendly farming models.

Each country focused on its own strengths in providing assistance. Estonia supported training programmes for Ukrainian officials

³ OECD, "Development aid in 2015 continues to grow despite costs for in-donor refugees", April 13, 2016, <http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/ODA-2015-detailed-summary.pdf>

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Estonia, Estonian Aid to Ukraine in 2015, http://www.vm.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/development-cooperation/estonian_aid_to_ukraine_in_2015_0.pdf

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, Latvia's support for Ukraine, May 4, 2016, <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/news/developments-in-ukraine/latvia-supports-ukraine>

⁶ Official Website of the Lithuanian Development Cooperation, Lithuanian Official Development Assistance 2004-2015, <https://www.orangeprojects.lt/en/statistics>

⁷ Official Website of the Lithuanian Development Cooperation, Development Cooperation and Democracy Promotion Programme in Ukraine, <https://www.orangeprojects.lt/en/ukraine-projects>

on e-governance and cyber security, while Latvia focused on anti-corruption and transparency in the use of public funds, as well as urban development planning. Lithuania, for its part, assisted with the creation of a sustainable system of state registers and shared experiences of increasing energy efficiency and independence.

Many initiatives are aimed at assisting Ukrainian internally displaced persons (IDPs), especially conflict affected children and war veterans. The first Ukrainian soldier who travelled abroad for medical assistance and rehabilitation was received in Lithuania. Multiple summer camps aiming to provide friendly environment and psychological assistance to refugee children were held in the Baltic States. Furthermore, government-funded scholarships for the EaP students



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were initiated in the best Baltic universities. For example, in 2015 Latvia allocated EUR 40 000 EUR for 15 Ukrainian students to study the European Studies program at the University of Latvia. The same year, a scholarship program in Estonia accounted to nearly EUR 200 000.

Lithuania has used its success story of the EU integration to increase public support for pro-European course and to refute myths about the West spread by Russia. In 2013, a Ukrainian-language magazine containing stories of renowned Lithuanians reflecting on the advantages of the EU membership was published⁸. Currently the Baltic States are focusing on increasing their own societies' resilience to Russian propaganda; as a result, numerous projects facilitating exchanges of experience and even content between Baltic and EaP journalists are now underway.

Due to good knowledge of the EaP region, Russia and Russian language, many professionals from the Baltic States were sent by their governments or assumed positions at different international missions aimed at assisting the Ukrainian government with reforms. The first post-Maidan Cabinet of Ministers even included Lithuanian-born Aivaras Abromavičius as Minister of Economic Development and Trade.

Future Cooperation

Among briefly described cooperation areas where Baltic experiences are of use to the EaP region, a continuous attention should be given to the following, among others:

- Supporting implementation of AAs and DCFTAs in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine;
- Detecting areas of mutual interests with Azerbaijan, Armenia and Belarus and using them as a basis for strengthening democratic developments, especially respect for human rights;
- Developing people-to-people contacts with focus on the youngest citizens of the Baltic States and EaP countries. Since young people in both regions have not of

⁸ Magazine can be accessed here: <http://www.eesc.lt/uploads/news/id668/UKR.pdf>

course had a common Soviet experience, thus, the risk of weakened ties arises. The implementation of visa-free travel for Ukrainian and Georgian citizens is a part of solution;

- Contributing to the common security by using NATO as a platform for initiatives such as the above-mentioned Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian battalion. Support for the NATO integration of interested EaP countries should be provided;
- Improving communication, first, by using success stories of the Baltic states when arguing for pro-European reforms and geopolitical direction, and second, by informing local populations about the EU support to the EaP region and raising public awareness about the actions of their respective governments;
- Creating a multi-layered cooperation, which would not rely on the activities of the Baltic and EaP NGOs, but involve inter-governmental/parliamentary/party cooperation. Bigger challenges arise when aiming to change the mindset of EaP political elites. Paradoxically, most resources are directed towards already advanced EaP society.

The ultimate advice is to accept the EaP countries as equal partners able to contribute to the development of the Baltic States. For example, Ukrainian experiences are of great use for increasing the Baltic States' resilience to Russian propaganda and modern unconventional warfare. Furthermore, not all of the Baltic experiences are applicable to the EaP region. They often need revision and adaptation to current realities. Therefore, an open mind when it comes either to bilateral or regional cooperation is essential.

Conclusions

The links between the Baltic States and the EaP countries are strong. The testaments of existing friendships are such initiatives as

Vilnius square in Tbilisi and Tbilisi square in Vilnius. Recently, a Lithuanian square was opened in Kyiv.

Development cooperation of the Baltic states more or less covers similar areas. However, it is nothing close to the Visegrad Group (V4) engagement, where supported projects have to include at least three of the V4 countries. The application of a similar approach and a joint fund for development cooperation projects would avoid overlapping and would efficiently increase the Baltic States' support to the EaP region.

As long as the Baltic states and the EaP countries' cooperation is dominated by bilateral initiatives, the hypothesis that their actions in the EaP region have a role in strengthening the Baltic states as a region cannot be confirmed. Of course, any positive developments within the EaP countries do have an effect on the Baltic States, as they increase the perception of safety in their neighbourhood. But it is in times of instability, for example, after the emergence of Ukrainian-Russian war, when Baltic states lean towards each other, assess their joint capacities and advocate within the EU and NATO for greater support. It can be concluded that, despite existing competition, the Baltic States have a strong tendency to stick together in the most difficult times. This pattern should prevail in the future.

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