

Original Research

Open Access

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Does Latvia Matter in Regional Geopolitics?

DOI 10.2478/jobs-2018-0002

received November 2, 2017; accepted February 9, 2018.

Abstract: As early as 1994, scholars, analysts and policymakers began to wonder the extent to which the Baltic States mattered in the relationship between Russia and the West. The general consensus for the following 20 years was that the Baltic States matter considerably, especially following their inclusion in both the EU and NATO in 2004. However, in the past few years two trends have emerged which begin to call this accepted knowledge into question. First, the relationship between Russia and the West has turned more hostile following nearly 20 years of detente. The West insists (especially NATO) insists that it is within its right to protect states that were formerly part of the Soviet Union/Russia's "near abroad". Russia, on the other hand, insists that NATO incursion into the "shared neighborhood" is a violation of trust and overstepping normal geopolitical bounds.

Second, the Baltic States who once presented something of a united front for the West against Russia, no longer appear to have a common approach to foreign policy. While Estonia leans toward Scandinavia, and Lithuania leans toward Poland and Ukraine, Latvia is a bit of an odd man out with nowhere to turn. Furthermore, even other states in the Shared Neighborhood no longer seem to see Latvia as a valuable ally within the West. Considering this state of affairs, this paper considers whether Latvia matters anymore in regional geopolitics, or whether they are losing relevance.

Keywords: Latvia; Baltic States; Russia; NATO; EU; Geopolitics.

1 Introduction

As early as 1994, scholars and analysts (in addition to politicians and policymakers) began to ask whether the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) mattered in regional geopolitics as relations between Russia and the West began to develop along new, supposedly more amiable, lines. That year, Carl Bildt (then Prime Minister of Sweden) argued that the Baltic States mattered because Russia–West relations, as played out in the Baltic States, are a clear indicator of what to expect from Russia–West relations going forward (Bildt 1994). In short, the Baltic States mattered to the extent that their positions between Russia and the West served as a bellwether of Russia–West relations.

In 2007, another article analyzed the foreign policies of the Baltic States, following the 2004 expansion of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), to determine whether the Baltic States still mattered in regional geopolitics, as well as (if so) the roles that they could play in the region. The article argued that the Baltic foreign policies indicated that they were ideally situated to serve as intermediaries between the EU and the Shared Neighborhood states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). The article argued that the Baltic States could act as "bridges" between the EU and the Shared Neighborhood states, showing how to Westernize and facilitating official relations that could potentially end in EU membership (Galbreath and Lamoreaux 2007).

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Since then, the geopolitical situation in Eastern Europe has changed considerably, in two specific ways. First, tensions between Russia and the West are rising. Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, both of which were (and still are) moving toward closer integration with the EU and NATO. At the time of writing, Russian troops are supporting separatists in Donbas, while Russia continues to violate Baltic air and maritime space, and both Russia and NATO continue to carry out war games. Furthermore, some pundits doubt whether the US and other NATO members are truly willing to uphold NATO's Article 5 were Russia to become militarily aggressive toward the Baltic States. In addition, the EU, at the behest of the US, continues to apply sanctions against Russia, souring the relationship even further.

Second, and key to this paper, both the 1994 and the 2007 articles make a case for the Baltic States, as a group, mattering in Eastern European geopolitics. However, more recently, there is something of a rift among the Baltic States regarding foreign policy objectives (Vitkus 2015, Bruge 2015, Partschefeld 2015). Specifically, Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius seem to disagree on their positions vis-à-vis the Shared Neighborhood, the EU, NATO, and Russia. In the north, Estonia is increasingly linking its identity and foreign policy objectives with the Nordic states. They are focusing much less on the Shared Neighborhood, and much more on their own position. In the south, Lithuania is doing something similar with Poland, though also pushing NATO involvement in Ukraine, as well as Ukrainian integration with the EU and NATO. Latvia, in the middle, is a bit of the odd one out and, consequently, is focusing its foreign policy on strengthening its own integration with the EU and NATO.

Considering these changes, does Latvia still have a role to play in the relationship between Russia and the West, and is Latvia still something of a bridge between the Shared Neighborhood states, the EU, and NATO? If not, is there a role that Latvia can still play in the region, or is it becoming less relevant in regional geopolitics?

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section focuses specifically on whether or not Latvia is a key player in the relationship between Russia, the EU, and NATO. The second section asks whether Latvia is still considered something of a bridge between the West and the Shared Neighborhood states. Both sections include a review of the current literature addressing those relations and then follow up with responses from interviews conducted in 2014 and 2015.¹ This is followed by the conclusion.

2 Latvia between Russia and the West

The purpose of this section is to illustrate the extent to which Latvia is still an important actor in the Russia–West relationship in academic literature. The section is divided into two subsections: Latvia's relations with the West, and Latvia's relations with Russia. If Latvia is still important to both the West *and* Russia, it certainly can still play an important role in the larger relationship. However, if one side or the other no longer sees Latvia as important, the country cannot play a key role in the relationship.

¹ We conducted open-ended, semistructured interviews for three reasons outlined by Aberbach and Rockman (2002). First, open-ended, semistructured interviews are very useful at allowing the researchers to gather information where it is, otherwise, limited. This suits our research as there is very limited public information on how the Shared Neighborhood states view Latvia's situation, even though it clearly has implications for them going forward. Our research intends to gather as much information as possible, and semistructured interviews serve that purpose. Second, open-ended interview questions can maximize response validity because respondents get to "organize their answers within their own frameworks" and elaborate their responses where they see fit. Third, it allows interviewers to "get at the contextual nuances of responses and to probe beneath the surface of a response to the reasoning and premises that underlie it".

2.1 Literature

The literature is surprisingly mixed. Within the EU, Latvia participates in several working groups that strengthen its ties with other EU states and give it an increased voice within the EU (Galbreath and Lamoreaux 2013, Kļaviņš et al. 2014). Furthermore, many scholars see Latvia as a beneficiary of EU policies (as opposed to being benefactors) primarily because the EU helps strengthen and stabilize Latvia's economy and diversify it away from Russia. However, the EU does not benefit from Latvia's membership (Muižnieks 2011, Istrate 2012, Thorhallsson 2012, Galbreath and Lamoreaux 2013, Fox 2013, Abesadze 2015).

Additionally, there are also several scholars who argue that EU membership is something of a detriment to Latvia. Specific examples include that Latvia and the rest of Eastern Europe are sacrificing their normative values to those of the EU as determined by larger states in Western Europe (Vilson 2015, Makarychev 2015, Bechev 2015, Paenke 2015, Kazharski and Makarychev 2015), that Latvia has far less say in its own foreign and domestic policies than it would otherwise have (Panke 2010, Wivel 2012, Rostoks 2012, Ozoliņš et al. 2015), that the largest states in the EU are no different from Russia in that they all look out for their own interests at the expense of smaller states (Molder 2011, Shlapentokh 2012), and that EU membership has not actually benefited Latvia's economy as much or in ways that many hoped (Oja 2015, Vitkus 2015, Ozoliņš et al. 2015). More specifically, there is a current argument that EU membership is actually hurting Latvia's economy because of Russian countersanctions (Oja 2015).

Latvia's membership in NATO presents a similar picture. At present, Latvia benefits from increased physical presence of NATO forces within Latvia (Bruge 2015, Vitkus 2015, Partschefeld 2015, Braw 2015, Kara-Murza 2015, Fruhling and Lasconjarias 2016, Clem 2016). However, some contend that the NATO presence is largely to blame for Latvian tensions with Russia (Pifer et al. 2015, Lukin 2015, Charap and Shapiro 2016, Arbatova and Dynkin 2016), and some doubt whether NATO would actually respond if Russia were to launch some form of military activity in the Baltic States (Braw 2015, Kroenig 2015, Clem 2016).

As for the second question (whether the EU and NATO benefit from Latvian membership), there is very little to argue that Latvian membership is vital for the EU or NATO. Granted, Latvia has been an active participant in NATO operations, most notably in Afghanistan (Braw 2015), but very much in a supporting role and a limited one at that (*The Baltic Times* 2016). And, as mentioned earlier, Latvian participation in EU working groups is something of a benefit to other EU members, but this does not necessarily mean that it is a benefit to the general membership of the EU.

As regards Russia, since 2004 Latvia's relations with Russia often took place within the context of EU and NATO memberships. However, this has not stopped Russia from exerting direct influence in Latvia. Specifically, Russia still wields economic influence (Simons 2015, Bruge 2015, Oja 2015) and, simply because of geographical proximity and the makeup of Latvia's economy, this connection will not go away any time soon regardless of EU involvement (Ozoliņš et al. 2015, Bruge 2015). Furthermore, Russia wields extensive influence through media (Partschefeld 2015, Braw 2015, Kara-Murza 2015, Simons 2015) and politics (Bergmane 2017), two additional arenas that membership in the EU and NATO will not likely alter. Perhaps most concerning for Latvia and NATO, Russia is more than willing to militarily threaten Latvia (BBC Russian Service 2016, Charap and Shapiro 2016). Though Russia may never follow through with those threats, NATO troop buildup in the region is not going to improve relations between Latvia and Russia (Braw 2015, Kroenig 2015, Pifer et al. 2015, Charap and Shapiro 2016, Fruhling and Lasconjarias 2016, Paszewski 2016).

2.2 Interviews

In our interviews conducted at Latvia's Ministry of Foreign affairs (MFA), we noticed two significant changes in the responses between 2014 and 2015. First, as regards the EU and NATO, the perspective has changed. For example, in 2014, our interviewees stated that Latvian economic needs were perceived among policymakers as a "Latvian issue", not an "EU issue", with the primary economic base existing in Russian bilateral agreements. Our interviewees indicated that Latvia was actually slightly distancing itself

from the EU on economic issues, and reaching out to Russia. By 2015, the situation had switched. Our interviewees stated that stronger economic goals within the EU, and a push for economic diversification to Poland, Germany, the Nordic states, and China were key to economic development rather than closer relations with Russia.

Yet, for all the talk about the EU, our interviews of 2014 and 2015 emphasized that relations with NATO are far more important than relations with the EU. As regards the role that NATO plays for Latvia vis-à-vis Russia, our 2014 interviewees mentioned that relations with Russia have become much more pragmatic since Latvia joined NATO. By 2015, relations had deteriorated, though our interviewees did emphasize that dialogue was still ongoing. Our interviewees even stated that the Latvian government hoped for closer cooperation between NATO and Russia, while also claiming that the tensions with Russia have actually provided justification for continued collective defense in NATO.

Second, understandably, there was a difference in perspectives toward Russia. For example, in January 2014, our interviewees viewed Russian pressure on Ukraine as a small issue, arguing that it was a “loss for Russia”, in that it simply further alienated Russia from the West. But, our interviewees did not see the situation as detrimental to Latvia. Understandably, our interview in 2015 produced a very different response. Latvian policymakers are effectively spooked by Russian aggression, with Latvian military security vis-à-vis Russia and deeper integration with NATO much higher on the agenda, but with the government still willing to engage Russia through talks and our interviewees expressing the desire to see NATO and Russia engage more directly.

2.3 Summary

It is clear that, according to the literature, EU and NATO membership still matter very much to Latvia, but the opposite seems somewhat in doubt. Granted, Latvia still plays a role in some regional groups within both the EU and NATO, and its relations with its immediate neighbors are important, but its wider influence on the EU and NATO is perceived as negligible. In contrast, however, the literature does suggest that Latvia still matters to Russia as suggested by continued Russian meddling in Latvia’s economy, media, and politics, as well as Russia’s unease about (and response to) increased NATO presence in the Baltic States.

The interviews largely support these findings. Our interview responses indicated more willingness to engage with NATO than the EU, though there was a willingness to engage with the EU more because of Russian countersanctions. As for Russia, our interview responses indicated that Russia also still matters for Latvia. Despite threats, our interviewees still hoped for some productive, diplomatic engagement with Russia, especially through the EU and NATO. So, Russia still matters to Latvia, and the hope is that EU and NATO can, increasingly, become effective vehicles for that engagement.

3 Latvia as a Bridge

How does the literature view Latvia’s potential as a bridge? Of the Shared Neighborhood states, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are the states with the most interest in eventual membership in the EU and NATO². Because of its geostrategic importance, Ukraine has close working ties with the majority of the large Western states. Georgia and Moldova also have working relations with other states, but, as a small state, Latvia has a better opportunity to act as a bridge between Georgia and Moldova on the one hand and the West on the other. Consequently, this section focuses exclusively on Latvia’s potential in terms of its relations with Georgia and Moldova.

² Moldova’s constitution does not allow it to join NATO, but it can join the EU.

3.1 Literature

One of the primary discussions in the current literature focuses on whether EU and NATO membership would even benefit Georgia and Moldova. Some argue that membership would certainly benefit Georgia and Moldova, primarily because membership helps distance these states from Russia (Pifer et al. 2015, Fruhling and Lasconjarias 2016, Paszewski 2016, Fiott 2016), although others argue that these states are much better off without the EU or NATO (Crocker 2015, Lukin 2015, Pifer et al. 2015, Makarychev 2015, Kazharski and Makarychev 2015, Paenke 2015, Vilson 2015, Arbatova and Dynkin 2016). The argument against EU and NATO membership stems, in part, from the perception that the EU and NATO do not really want to expand but are dangling the carrot of membership in front of Georgia and Moldova simply to stabilize and democratize the region: not because they actually intend to expand (Boedeltje and van Houtum 2011, Dimitrovova 2012, Joenniemi 2012, Cottey 2012, Bechev 2015, Buscaneanu 2015, Dragan 2015). In other words, the EU and NATO hope to have the benefits of a strong neighborhood without having to pay the price to get it.

As for Latvia, specifically, there is an argument that the EU and NATO benefit as Latvia helps Georgia and Moldova “Westernize” (Kesa 2011, Whitman and Juncos 2013, Galbreath and Lamoreaux 2013, Kļaviņš et al. 2014, Martinezgarnelo Y Calvo 2014, Vilson 2015), but the above-mentioned doubt about the EU’s and NATO’s real intentions potentially undermine this argument. Furthermore, even this “benefit” is in question as Latvia’s foreign policy objectives become less focused on being a “bridge” and more focused on taking care of their own interests (Made 2011, Dimitrovova 2012, Joenniemi 2012, Cottey 2012, Pastore 2013).

3.2 Interviews

This perception that Latvian interest in its relations with Georgia and Moldova is decreasing was born out in both sets of interviews.³In 2014, our interviewees at the Latvian MFA talked very little of Georgia or Moldova and, even when specifically asked about them, kept directing the discussion back to Ukraine and Russia. In fact, the only mention of either Georgia or Moldova was a comment that Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 is a solid example of why Russia cannot ever be trusted. Our interviewees from Georgia also did not talk much about relations with Latvia other than to say that Latvia is a great friend and provides valuable guidance.⁴ In fact, the interview responses indicated that Georgia’s relations with the US, Poland, and Sweden are the key to their further integration with the West, rather than relations with Latvia. Remarks from our interviewees from Moldova were of a similar nature. They indicated that they were grateful for Latvian assistance but stated that Romania and Poland are more important within the EU context. Perhaps more importantly, our interviewees indicated that relations with the EU, though certainly to be pursued, were not necessarily as desirable as some portray, stating that the general population of Moldova is more interested in economic cooperation with Russia than with the EU, and even criticizing Latvia’s haste in joining the EU, arguing that, in the process of joining too hastily, Latvia lost something of its identity and sacrificed its interests to the EU. In neither case did we see solid evidence that Latvia is a key player between Georgia/Moldova and the West.

Although regional geopolitics changed considerably between January 2014 and June 2015, perceptions from our interviewees did not change, further indicating that Latvia’s role vis-à-vis Georgia and Moldova is somewhat insignificant. In our interview at the Latvian MFA, there was little distinction between 2014 and 2015. While, in 2014, our interviewees only mentioned Georgia as an example of Russian aggression, in 2015, they mentioned Georgia only as the primary recipient of their EU-mandated foreign development aid and as a potential NATO member (although Latvia’s primary emphasis was still on Ukraine). In fact, our

³ See Appendix for list of questions.

⁴ Our interviewees did say that, according to one of their contacts in the US embassy in Tbilisi, Georgia is the fourth Baltic state.

Latvian interviewee was much more interested in discussing NATO membership for Finland and Sweden, as well as strengthening the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), than in talking about potential eastward expansion to Georgia, Moldova, or even Ukraine.

The positions of our interviewees from Georgia and Moldova were also strikingly similar vis-à-vis Latvia. Both interviewees indicated gratitude for Latvia's friendship and willingness to advocate for them within the EU and NATO, but both still mentioned different states as their primary advocates within both organizations. Perhaps the only specific change in foreign policy objectives was from our Moldovan interviewee, who indicated that Moldova's government is taking EU membership much more seriously because of Russian aggression in Ukraine. Moreover, although our Moldovan interviewee did not indicate fear of a Russian invasion, along the lines of Crimea, they did indicate that Russia could significantly affect the country's economy.

3.3 Summary

What does this tell us about the relationship among Latvia, Georgia, and Moldova? First, Latvia seems less keen on being a "bridge" for Georgia and Moldova. Rather, it seems more focused on making sure they are secure, especially vis-à-vis Russia, on expanding NATO to Sweden and Finland, and on expanding the role of CSDP. Second, both Georgia and Moldova are keen for inclusion in the West, but neither of them sees Latvia as the most significant state in pushing their agenda within those organizations. Rather, they both indicated that their interests are better represented by other, larger states. Other states are more suitable bridges.

4 Conclusion

Does Latvia matter in regional geopolitics? Our research suggests three things. First, Latvia is marginally important to the EU and NATO as a member. It is not as important to these organizations as the organizations are to Latvia. Second, Latvia does matter to Russia, as illustrated in continued Russian influence in Latvia. Furthermore, Russia continues to matter to Latvia as the government still perceives Russia as a threat. Third, although Latvia may be a good friend to Georgia and Moldova, it is less important than other states. Furthermore, if the EU and NATO do not intend to expand to include Moldova and Georgia (as some of the literature suggests), it further diminishes the role that Latvia can play in EU and NATO expansion policy. In short, Latvia's role in regional geopolitics is less important than in 2007, as well as less important than that of other countries in the region, although the Russia–Latvia relationship remains just as important.

What does this mean? Latvia's importance to the EU and NATO depends, in part, on those organizations remaining interested in the goings-on in the Shared Neighborhood. It also depends on a united Baltic role in pushing EU and NATO interests into the Shared Neighborhood. With EU and NATO interest in the Shared Neighborhood decreasing, with Baltic foreign policies diverging, and with Russian interest in the region staying the same, and even increasing, the outlook for Latvia is potentially bleak. It suggests that Latvia, far from being a standard bearer of EU and NATO expansion to the east, could become anything from a peripheral player in the West, to a Russian puppet state within the EU and NATO.

Now, acknowledging the shortcomings of our research, we suggest additional research directions into this topic. We suggest more research into the overall slowing down, and potential cessation, of EU and NATO integration in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. If these institutions are slowing down, will they eventually stop? If so, this presents a very complicated situation for Latvia, not to mention the rest of Eastern Europe. Second, assuming that EU and NATO expansion slows or stops, what role might Russia play in determining the fate of Latvia and other smaller states in the region? Considering that these scenarios are possibilities, the respective governments of small states in the region, especially the governments of Latvia, Georgia, and Moldova, would do well to consider the implications and put together some plan of response.

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Appendix A

Interviews in January 2014:

- Interview at the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Riga, January 20, 2014.
- Interview at the Georgian Embassy in Riga, January 21, 2014.
- Interview at the Moldovan Embassy in Riga, January 22, 2014.

Interviews in June 2015:

- Interview at the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Riga, June 11, 2015.
- Interview at the Georgian Embassy in Riga, June 9, 2015.
- Interview at the Moldovan Embassy in Riga, June 8, 2015.

Questions asked at the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), as well as at the Georgian and Moldovan Embassies:

- How are military relations with Russia? What are your goals regarding future relations?
- How are relations with the EU and NATO? What are your goals regarding future relations?
- How are economic relations with Russia? What are your goals regarding future relations?
- (To Georgian and Moldovan Embassies) How are relations with Latvia?
- (To Latvian MFA) How are relations with Georgia and Moldova?