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The Changing Security Configuration and Balance of Power in the Baltic Region: Implications for Russia



Natalia Markushina

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Author:

Natalia Markushina, Doctor of Political Sciences

Reviewer:

Natalia Zaslavskaya, Ph.D. in History

Editors:

Elena Karpinskaya (Lead Editor); **Natalia Vyakhireva**, Ph.D. in Political Sciences; **Milan Lazovich**; **Katerina Trotskaya**; **Svetlana Gavrilova**, Ph.D. in History (Publishing Editor)

Markushina, Natalia

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The following working paper examines the current state of security in the Baltic region. It has become clear that there is no going back to the pre-Ukraine crisis balance of power structure. NATO's expansion into Sweden and Finland can radically transform the political and security landscape in the Baltic region and destroy the established forms of cooperation these states have with Russia. This paper covers: risks and opportunities states face by engaging with Russia in the Baltic region; the changes in the region's security configuration and their implications for Russia; the position of the Baltic states on the Ukraine crisis and its impact on their relations with Russia; and the security of Kaliningrad.

The opinions expressed in this working paper reflect solely the personal views and analytical outlook of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Russian International Affairs Council NP (Non-profit Partnership).

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Introduction

These last few years have witnessed a dramatic change in the general understanding and interpretation of state security policies. The system of international relations has undergone sweeping transformations following the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalation of the Ukraine crisis. It appears that the world will continue to remain unbalanced and unstable for a rather long time. It is important to recognize that the contemporary practices of critical decision-making will depend on the interests of the parties involved. In this context, understanding how security policies may evolve regionally, as well as globally becomes more important than ever.

As it stands today, the situation around the Baltic region is highly complicated. Any analysis of the region's security has to account for changes resulting from new external threats and other 21st century challenges. Starting back in 2014, the Ukraine crisis led to a confrontation between Russia and Europe, prompting a revision of the security philosophies in the Baltic region.

To begin, it is important to first identify the main players involved. The region could be narrowly defined as states that have direct access to the Baltic Sea: Russia, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.¹ However, Norway and Iceland are members of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the Republic of Belarus is also deeply involved in regional affairs—largely through Russian support—and cannot be disregarded in the analysis. This is especially true in the context of the Kaliningrad Oblast. Additional consideration should be given to the interests of other countries that pursue their policies in the Baltic region via the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

There are also numerous challenges that hinder the establishment of a common security policy in the region and often makes consensus unattainable. The lack of a common Baltic identity is one example. Other hurdles include the absence of universal norms—apart from environmental policies – that are shared by all the region's players, a lack of regional security institutions, and discordant state approaches to understanding threats, especially in recent times.

¹ Klemeshev A.P., Korneevets V.S., Palmowski T., Studzieniecki T., Fedorov G.M. Approaches to the Definition of the Baltic Sea Region // Baltic Region. 2017. Vol. 9. No. 4. P. 4–20.

Security in the Baltic Sea Region: State of Play, Risks and Opportunities for Russia

Back during the days of the USSR, there existed a certain balance where Denmark, Norway and Iceland, all NATO members since 1949, were offset by Sweden's neutrality and a policy of maintaining special relations based on agreements between Finland and the Soviet Union. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were Soviet Republics at that time and Poland, along with East Germany, were part of the Socialist bloc.²

All of this changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the expanding role and presence of the European Union (EU). Some attempts were made, nevertheless, to keep the region in a type of equilibrium state. In 1995, the EU welcomed Finland and Sweden, with the latter still maintaining its neutral status and the former, honoring its foreign policy traditions, tried to build relations both with the EU and Russia based on the Northern Dimension policy concept. Russo-European relations, however soon faced problems due to gaps and misalignments between policy documents and concepts that lay the goal-setting process for Baltic regional strategic development. This included means to identify critical challenges and methods for finding solutions and developing action plans. In 2004, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland became part of the EU, thus EU-member states made up the majority of states in the Baltic region.

In 2009, the European Council approved the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), which became the first macro-regional strategy in Europe.³ Here, it is important to understand what forces actually went behind the security concept. Was it feasible to go about constructing policy frameworks for Europe and the Baltic region without considering the interests of Russia, which is geographically part of both Europe and the Baltic region? In other words, did Europe want to see Russia as part of the European security system? With time, it became evident that Russia was being antagonized by the European Union, who constantly challenged its neighbor with a host of accusations. Even during the first few years after the establishment of the Russian Federation, the list of threats imputed to Russia were quite extensive: from complaints about effluent discharge in the Baltic Sea and the security of nuclear power facilities, to the EU's dependence on energy supplies, the militarization of the Kaliningrad Oblast, and the unresolved controversies over how to interpret the events of the Second World War.⁴ Nevertheless, Europe also tried to build relations on the basis of finding a common understanding for sustainable development, a shared cultural agenda and universal healthcare protections.

² Markushina N.Yu. Russia and the Concepts of Northern Europe // "Obozrevatel–Observer" Research & Analysis Journal. 2011. No. 7. P. 66–73; Markushina N.Yu. Northern Model and Policy of Russia // "Obozrevatel–Observer" Research & Analysis Journal. 2011. No. 4. P. 92–100.

³ EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region // European Commission.
URL: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/baltic-sea_en

⁴ Europe's Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region // Euroregion Baltic.
URL: <https://www.eurobalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2005/12/file82.pdf>

Here, Russia faced a dilemma: should it align its regional policy with the European rules of the game that were so adamantly dictated by its Baltic partners, or should it build an independent policy, one based solely on its own national interests?⁵

There should be no illusion that each of Russia's neighbors in the Baltic region have a say in their intra-regional policy-making. However, the influence of the United States in shaping Baltic security policies should also not be disregarded. Back in 1997, the US government launched its Baltic-oriented Northern Europe Initiative (NEI). It was followed up by the Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe (e-PINE) which contains the following statements: "The policy's foremost goal, the integration of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia into the western European community of democracies, has been achieved, as symbolized by offers of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) membership for the three states. NEI was also successful at fostering a network of political and personal connections among Baltic countries with the United States."⁶ According to this strategy, "The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and with it the Enhanced Opportunities Partners (EOPs) program remain to be the pillars of European security. The United States will work with Alliance members and EOPs in Northern Europe to strengthen regional security."⁷ All these plans (with the exception of the Northern Europe Initiative) not only failed to include Russia, but deliberately concentrated on developing the region without it, emphasizing the role of NATO and the European Union instead.

Consider the following example that vividly portrays US influence on Baltic states: On April 3, 2018, a delegation of three Baltic state presidents arrived in Washington for talks with US President Donald Trump. At the presidential summit, which marked the "100 years of the Baltic states' separation from Russia", the heads of state discussed expanding US military presence in the Baltic countries, and raised the issue of natural gas supplies from America. Speaking about Russia at the joint press conference, President D. Grybauskaitė said: "When a country behaves aggressively, conducts wars, threatens that it has nuclear missiles on your border – of course, you sometimes call this country not very friendly. That's why we are investing in our defense, we investing in our security, we investing in reforming NATO, and we would like to see a strong NATO, a strong alliance. And that's what we are going to do together".⁸ It is quite obvious that the United States aimed to promote its energy interests, while Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania aimed to strengthen their individual ambitions in becoming leaders in Baltic security matters. Thus, the only role Russia was allowed to be in this setup was to simply be a threat.

Thus, it was not much of a surprise when, on March 6, 2018, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the foreign ministers of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

⁵ Markushina N.Yu. Prospects for the Transformation of the "New North" Concept at the Present Stage // *Azimuth of Scientific Research: Economics and Administration*. 2015. No. 4(13). P. 100–102.

⁶ Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe (e-PINE) // U.S. Department of State. Bureau of European and Eurasian affairs. URL: <https://www.state.gov/enhanced-partnership-in-northern-europe-e-pine/>

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Remarks by President Trump and Heads of the Baltic States in Joint Press Conference // U.S. Embassy in Estonia. URL: <https://ee.usembassy.gov/remarks-joint-press-conference/>

agreed to “deepen their cooperation to combat Russia’s disinformation efforts and malicious cyber activity. They discussed strategies to address the threat Russia poses to European security and Russia’s lack of respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbors.”⁹

However, the declaration released following the summit said only that “the United States of America intends to continue periodic deployment of forces to the Baltic States to strengthen deterrence and to catalyze the efforts of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to develop their national defense structures. The United States is determined to help Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania improve their military readiness and capabilities through sustained security assistance. We continue to explore new ideas and opportunities, including air defense, bilaterally and in NATO, to enhance deterrence across the region.”¹⁰ Of course, the issue pertaining to energy had to be mentioned in the declaration as well.¹¹ The United States was clearly advancing its own energy interests in exchange for an illusion of support offered to the Baltic states.

Unsurprisingly, efforts to keep the idea of the “Russian threat” alive in the Baltic Sea region has spared over the recent years. After all, all of the countries in the Baltic Sea region, except Russia and, so far, Sweden, are NATO members. There is no doubt that NATO is where the Baltic states have long placed all their security bets, given that since early 2016 “NATO has taken defensive and proportionate steps in response to a changed security environment. In response to Russia’s use of military force against its neighbors, Allies requested a greater NATO presence in the Baltic region.”¹² In reality, that led to more military battalions stationed in the Baltic area with NATO deploying “four multinational battlegroups” – or “enhanced forward presence” – to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

In 2017, the battlegroups became fully operational. More than 4,500 troops from Europe and North America work closely together with home defense forces.”¹³ This largely pushed the countries away from independent decision-making. Instead, it pushed them towards the receiving end of NATO policies, which did not bother Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania who had to justify the sustained anti-Russian rhetoric.

On June 12, 2020, NATO’s North Atlantic Council recognized Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner. This status is part of NATO’s Partnership Interoperability Initiative, which aims to maintain and deepen cooperation between Allies and partners that have made significant contributions to NATO-led operations and missions.¹⁴ It is also clear that this is not what Russia would have

⁹ Secretary Tillerson’s Meeting with the Foreign Ministers of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania // U.S. Embassy in Estonia.
URL: <https://ee.usembassy.gov/estonia-latvia-lithuania/>

¹⁰ A Declaration to Celebrate 100 Years of Independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania // U.S. Embassy in Estonia.
URL: <https://ee.usembassy.gov/declaration-100-years-independence/>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² NATO-Russia relations: the facts // NATO website. URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_111767.htm

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ NATO recognizes Ukraine as Enhanced Opportunities Partner // NATO website.
URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_176327.htm

wanted to happen. Especially, considering that today – even before the events of 2022 – Russia has been regarded by the world mostly as an energy and military power. The global community has long had an ingrained image of Russia as a successor to the USSR who inherited all the negative (or so thinks the West) traits like ambition for global dominance and use of military and energy to further its national interests.¹⁵ The events in Ukraine only contributed to the growing anti-Russian sentiments. Following the reunification of Crimea with Russia in 2014, Swedish Foreign Minister Karl Bildt announced that Russia had strayed off the “the path to a better future”.¹⁶

Any discussions of energy security issues and associated proposals made by Russia were met with a good deal of apprehension from Baltic political elites. Just take a look back to the resistance encountered during the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline projects. The construction of Nord Stream 2 was frozen and then the pipelines were blown up in an attack that still remains riddled in controversy.

Throughout this confrontational climate, the Council of the Baltic Sea States could have become a powerful tool in shaping the region’s future security strategy. The organization tried to address key environmental, humanitarian and social problems, including the spread of organized crime and illegal immigration across the region.¹⁷ Most of these challenges, however, could not be resolved without Russia – a realization also reached by other CBSS partners.¹⁸

Under the Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2016, “Russia’s participation in the activities of the Council of the Baltic Sea States plays an important role.”¹⁹ The anti-Russian rhetoric, however, left an imprint area as well. On March 3, 2022, members of the CBSS, obviously barring Russia, issued a declaration: “We see no possibility to continue our cooperation as envisaged with the Russian Federation within the framework of the CBSS. We will ensure the suspension of Russia from the proceedings, work and projects of the CBSS and its working bodies until cooperation under the fundamental principles of international law becomes possible again.”²⁰

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in turn, made a statement on May 17, 2022, saying that “The situation at the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)

¹⁵ Markushina N.Yu. Prospects for the Transformation of the “New North” Concept at the Present Stage // *Azimuth of Scientific Research: Economics and Administration*. 2015. No. 4(13). P. 100–102.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Oldberg I. Soft Security in the Baltic Sea Region Russian interests in the Council of Baltic Sea States // *Swedish Institute of International Affairs*. URL: <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/soft-security-in-the-baltic-sea-region-russian-interests-in-the-council-of-baltic-sea-states-min.pdf>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Executive Order of the President of the Russian Federation No 640 dated November 30, 2016. On Approving the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation // *Official Website of the President of Russia*. URL: <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/acts/files/0001201612010045.pdf>

²⁰ Declaration by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland and Sweden and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the participation by the Russian Federation and Belarus in the work of the Council of the Baltic Sea States // *Government.no*. URL: <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/8818049096154946aedc4b2508cd43f0/220303-final-draft-declaration-cbss-minus-russia.pdf>

has been deteriorating. NATO and EU members of the CBSS have turned their backs on equitable dialogue and the principles upon which this regional Baltic organization was built, and have consistently turned it into an anti-Russia political tool.”²¹ Thus, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced the suspension of Russia’s membership in the CBSS. The statement also said that “terminating Russia’s CBSS membership will not affect its presence in the region. Any attempts to oust the country from the Baltic area are doomed to fail. We will continue to work with responsible partners, hold events on key issues pertaining to the development of the Baltic region, our common heritage, and protect the interests of our compatriots.”²²

Today, dangerous confrontational conditions have become exceedingly visible in the Baltic Sea region where Russia is pitted against a united team of states, expressing an anti-Russian agenda. Most are NATO and EU members, and lack all types of discussion forums to support any kind of security dialogue.

²¹ Foreign Ministry Statement on the withdrawal of the Russian Federation from the Council of the Baltic Sea States // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. May 17, 2022.
URL: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1813674/

²² *Ibid.*

NATO's Sweden–Finland Enlargement: New Security Configurations, Balance of Power, and Implications for Russia

In order to understand the implications of Sweden and Finland's NATO membership, the question of what would change if NATO formally confirms Sweden and Finland's accession, countries that are already well integrated into NATO's activities, must first be answered. Tuomas Forsberg, a Finnish political scholar believes that "it was a big shift in both countries' foreign and security policies, but a logical consequence of steps taken in the post–Cold War era".²³

Results from a "logical consequence" analysis, i.e. the evolution of Sweden and Finland's security policy strategy, are quite enlightening. During the Cold War, both countries stood by certain principals. Sweden announced its policy "to be free from unions in peacetime with the aim of maintaining neutrality in case of a war."²⁴ It was only in 1995 that Sweden received the status of an observer in the Western European Union.²⁵ Finland, on the other hand, pursued a policy of military nonalignment and independent defense, calling for stronger European security structures based on broad international cooperation. A step taken to realize such ambitions included the signing of the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (YYA Treaty) in April 1948. Among factors that contributed to stability in the region were, notably, the proposals made by the Baltic Sea states to ensure Nordic countries maintain a nuclear-free status. These were the issues that Finland's President U. Kekkonen was working on in the 1960s.²⁶ He raised the question of the need to formalize the de-facto nuclear-free status of the Northern Europe through mutual agreements.²⁷

Much has changed since the end of the Cold War. Closer cooperation with NATO began when Sweden joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 1994 and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (a multilateral forum for dialogue that brings together all Allies and partner countries in the Euro-Atlantic area) in 1997.²⁸ The Individual Partnership Cooperation Programme (IPCP), which is developed by IPCP partners every two years, has set the course for cooperation between Finland and NATO, as well as Sweden and NATO.²⁹ The Swedish government described its interests within the framework of the Partnership as:

²³ Forsberg T. Finland and Sweden's Road to NATO // *Current History*. 2023. Vol. 122. No. 842. P. 89–94.

²⁴ Hirdman S. *Sverige, EG och neutraliteten // Tiden*. Stockholm. 1989. Arg.81. No. 6/7. P. 334. See also: *Sweden and the European Community*. Moscow, 1990. P. 20.

²⁵ Markushina N.Yu. Pogodin, S.N. *The Economic and Political Geography of Northern Europe*. St. Petersburg, 2004. P. 35.

²⁶ Markushina N.Yu. *Soft Security Issues in the Context of the Northern Dimension // The Caspian Region: Politics, Economics, Culture*. 2011. No. 2(27). P.107–116.

²⁷ Kekkonen U.K. *Finland: Path to Peace and Good Neighborhood. Articles, Speeches and Letters. 1943–1978*. Moscow, 1979. P. 278–279.

²⁸ *Relations with Sweden // NATO website*. URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52535.htm; *Relations with Finland // NATO website*. URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49594.htm?selectedLocale=en

²⁹ *Ibid*.

- “The need to maintain a high military and civil level of cooperate in international crisis management operations (interoperability) and to carry out the internationalization of Swedish forces, including as a troop contributor to peace-supporting operations.
- The need to influence activities carried out together with NATO, as a Partner country and troop contributor.
- A more general interest into the activities and development of NATO.”³⁰

In 2001, Finland and Sweden signaled their claim to an active role by presenting “a joint initiative on enhancing the role of the EAPC, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, in combatting terrorism. The EAPC brings together the NATO member states and the Partnership for Peace (PfP) countries. The main aim of the initiative is to identify some possible areas of co-operation within the EAPC to enhance the contribution of the Council in the fight against terrorism.”³¹

In close cooperation with NATO, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Finland and Sweden established the Nordic Defense Cooperation – NORDEFECO in 2009, which has grown into a forum for discussing Nordic security strategies.³² In November 2018, Nordic defense ministers signed NORDEFECO Vision 2025, which sets out “the political framework and ambitions for defense cooperation in the Nordic region to 2025”, using some general guidelines, in addition to 16 specific goals. Vision 2025 expands the ambitions of the Nordic defense cooperation by stating that it should be applied not only during times of peace, but also in the event of a crisis or conflict.

The aim is, among other things, to make NORDEFECO a platform for close political dialogue, information sharing, and, if possible, the coordination of common Nordic positions on possible crisis situations.”³³ The document also supports strengthening cooperation with Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.³⁴

What all these plans are missing is any security-related engagement with Russia. It is also important to remember that Sweden and Finland were some of the most active NATO partners and valuable contributors to the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, the Kosovo Force (KFOR) in Kosovo, and NATO Mission Iraq (NMI).

There is also the separate issue of the military exercises that Finland and Sweden conduct and participate in. On September 11, 2017, Sweden started its Aurora

³⁰ Sweden's cooperation in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) and Partnership for Peace (PfP) // The Government Offices of Sweden. URL: <https://www.government.se/contentassets/2e85a5b2191c4a4393afbd2e608cc613/swedens-cooperation-in-the-euro-atlantic-partnership-council-eapc-and-partnership-for-peace-pfp>

³¹ Finland and Sweden present a joint initiative on action against terrorism in NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. Press releases, November 7, 2001 // Finland abroad. URL: https://finlandabroad.fi/web/cub/comunicados-de-prensa-del-ministerio-de-asuntos-exteriores/-/asset_publisher/kyaK4Ry9kbQ0/content/suomen-ja-ruotsin-terrorismin-vastaisa-toimia-koskeva-yhteisaloite-euroatlantisessa-kumppanuusneuvostossa/35732

³² The NORDEFECO chod guidance. Version 2.02 December 2011 // NORDEFECO. URL: https://www.nordefco.org/Files/111202_chod-guidance-v-2_final.pdf

³³ NORDEFECO Vision 2025 // NORDEFECO. URL: <https://www.nordefco.org/Files/nordefco-vision-2025-signed.pdf>

³⁴ Ibid.

2017 military exercises. Frida Valnor of the Dagens Industri newspaper noted that the “serious attitude to the Russian military threat.”³⁵ According to her report, “the exercise scenario is highly realistic: a superior military force, i.e. Russia, tries to gain control over the Baltic Sea and foil NATO’s efforts to help the Baltic states, attacking Sweden in the process.”³⁶ The American military took an active part in the exercise. Army General Curtis M. Scaparrotti who was then Commander of US European Command said that “the interoperability and cooperation of Sweden and the United States remains vital. I look forward to future military exercises, like Aurora 17, in which we can all learn and share valuable information regarding arms.”³⁷ The other foreign units came from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway, albeit in much smaller numbers.³⁸ Quite important were the final phases of the exercise that focused on “real, joint, and multinational defensive operations against attacks from two fictitious countries: A-Land and B-Land. Geographically, these countries are, according to the official exercise maps, located on what is Russian and Belarusian territory in the real world.”³⁹ According to the exercise scenario, “the armed forces of these countries launch attacks on the island of Gotland and parts of the Swedish homeland, especially against strategically important areas – such as Arlanda Airport. The international contingents in Aurora 17 primarily play the role of the attackers, but other foreign forces join with Swedish troops to defend against attacks from the east.”⁴⁰ Sweden and Finland’s growing cooperation with NATO came to full swing when on May 18, 2022, NATO announced that “In light of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022, Sweden (together with Finland) submitted on May 18, 2022 its official letter of application to become a NATO Ally.”⁴¹ The political researcher Tuomas Forsberg observed that for both Finland and Sweden the key motivation to join NATO was the need for a stronger strategic stability amid Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The swift decision to give up their traditional positions of military nonalignment are impossible to understand without considering the strong public reaction to Russia’s actions.⁴²

Was this a total surprise for Russia? It was a rather expected consequence of Finland and Sweden’s policies. Back in 2016, Finland’s foreign ministry published a report, “The Effects of Finland’s Possible NATO Membership”, which stated that “the possibility to apply for membership remains a tool to master the geopolitical

³⁵ Scandinavian Media: Russia Will Conquer the Baltic States and Sweden to Boot // Inosmi. September 12, 2017. URL: <http://inosmi.ru/overview/20170914/240274814.html>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ U.S. Forces Participate in Swedish Military Exercise // U.S. Department of Defense. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1316420/us-forces-participate-in-swedish-military-exercise/>

³⁸ The Strategic Ramifications of the Aurora 17 Exercise in Sweden // International centre for defence and security. URL: <https://icds.ee/en/the-strategic-ramifications-of-the-aurora-17-exercise-in-sweden/>

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ The Strategic Ramifications of the Aurora 17 Exercise in Sweden // International centre for Defence and Security. URL: <https://icds.ee/en/the-strategic-ramifications-of-the-aurora-17-exercise-in-sweden/>

⁴¹ Relations with Sweden // NATO website. URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52535.htm; Relations with Finland // NATO website. URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49594.htm?selectedLocale=en

⁴² Forsberg T. Finland and Sweden’s Road to NATO // Current History. 2023. No. 122 (842). P. 89–94.

dilemma posed by an unpredictable neighbor”⁴³ and that “the effects of possible NATO membership would be considerably more benign for Finland if such a decision were made in a coordinated manner by Finland and Sweden, than if Finland joined alone. Similarly, a Swedish decision to join NATO and a Finnish decision not to join would leave Finland isolated and exposed.”⁴⁴

Note that at this stage only Finland has successfully acceded to the organization, leaving behind Sweden, who has been trying to follow in Finland’s stead. On April 4, 2023, the process began to integrate Finland into NATO, ending with signing of the Joint Declaration on the Closure of the Military Integration Process of Finland’s NATO membership on June 12, 2023. General Kivinen, Commander of Finland’s Defense Forces, said that “NATO is built upon the Musketeer principle: one for all, all for one. We Finns understand that well and are committed to fulfilling the obligations that stem from this principle.”⁴⁵ But the problem is not about the principle. For Finland, joining NATO has completely changed the rules of the game with Russia. Moreover, Sweden is still struggling to get its “musketeer tabard”. Neither Hungary, nor Turkey has ratified its application and this impasse is unlikely to be resolved until autumn of 2023, if not later. The public burnings of the Koran do not really score popularity points for Sweden, while Hungary’s Prime Minister Victor Orban has his own political agenda that runs counter to Sweden’s aspiration for speedy NATO membership. So, Finland found itself in the ranks of NATO allies, but without Sweden’s “shoulder” to rely on while facing the unconcealed displeasure of its powerful neighbor.

True, NATO’s expansion in the Baltic Sea region is frustrating for Russia as the resulting alignment of geopolitical forces is not one that the Russian government is comfortable with. The main problem, though, lies in the fact that now most Baltic Sea countries will be part of a security club, specifically excluding Russia, thus entailing additional risks of potential conflict escalation. There is no doubt that Russia will also have to take measures to bolster security at its borders. Yet, what may be more troubling is the fundamental change in the security strategy of Sweden and Finland that complicates further relations with these states. The abrupt break in relations in 2022 following the escalation of the Ukraine crisis closed multiple opportunities for Russia and Finland. It is important to realize that even if Sweden and Finland revise their policy, they will not be able to back down on their binding NATO commitments. This will also affect the interactions these countries have with Russia within the framework of the European Union. At this point, Russia has been and will continue to be a “threatening source” for Finland and Sweden, and this cannot be changed for any time soon. Further developments will largely depend on achieving a settlement on Ukraine and NATO’s actions to this effect. Russia also recognizes that political ramifications are unavoidable as, incidentally, is the need to adjust its vision of its security policy in the Baltic Sea region.

⁴³ The effects of Finland’s possible NATO membership // Foundation for Strategic Research. URL: <https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/autres/2016/2016-heisbourg-mfa-finland-nato.pdf>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Joint Declaration on the Closure of the Military Integration Process of Finland’s NATO membership Defence Forces // The Finnish Defence Forces. URL: <https://puolustusvoimat.fi/en/-/joint-declaration-on-the-closure-of-the-military-integration-process-of-finland-s-nato-membership>

Position of the Baltic Sea Countries on the Ukraine Crisis: Contributions and Support

The position of the Baltic Sea countries is unambiguously anti-Russian. However, it would be an overreaction to blame the events in Ukraine as the main reason for their confrontational stance. Rather, they were a catalyst that triggered the response which has been long in the making by the Baltic country political elites. So, what are the underlying causes? It is hard to disagree with Dr. Renald Simonyan, Professor of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, that “the political dialectic here is that the worse the relations are between the EU, United States and Russia, the more convincing is the act the Baltic states put on to pass themselves off as the last barrier for Europe’s civilization against the unpredictable Russia. This makes it easier for them to secure subsidies and harness support from the big states with which they chose to ... team up with.”⁴⁶

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, as well as Poland, worked hard to reclaim their place and role in the western political scene by revising their national histories, their treatment of Russian-speaking ethnic minorities and the Russian language, and more generally, their attitudes towards its eastern neighbor. In 2004, the European Union and NATO (Poland has been a NATO member since 1999) welcomed these states into their “close family”, which not only provides rights, but also bounds them with commitments. To be more specific, back “in 2006, NATO Defense Ministers agreed to commit a minimum of 2% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to defense spending to ensure the Alliance’s military readiness.”⁴⁷ Given their less than impressive economic performance, Baltic states had to offer the electorate compelling justifications to strengthen their military capabilities. So, the willingness to make a clean break with the “totalitarian past” was gradually morphing into the idea of there being a “Russian threat”. The European Union played a part in forming this narrative as well. According to scholar Vladislav Vorotnikov, “Ukraine gained the spotlight in the foreign policy of Scandinavian-Baltic region states (Denmark, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Estonia) in 2004 – first, as a result of another expansion of the European Union which advanced all the way to the Ukraine’s border, and second, because of the orange revolution at the end of that year.”⁴⁸ The Eastern Partnership, established in 2009, was designed to bring the EU closer to Ukraine, bypassing Russia. However, in 2022, Baltic states finally assumed a rather tough position towards Russia. Almost from day one of the conflict, “Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia joined the calls to trigger Article 4 of the NATO Treaty and start consultations considering “the threat to terri-

⁴⁶ Simonyan, R.Kh. The Baltic States and Russia in the Context of the Ukrainian Crisis // World Economy and International Relations. 2019. Vol. 63. No. 9. P. 61. URL: https://www.imemo.ru/index.php?page_id=1248&file=https://www.imemo.ru/files/File/magazines/meimo/09_2019/08-SIMONYAN.pdf

⁴⁷ Funding NATO // NATO website. URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_67655.htm

⁴⁸ Vorotnikov V.V. Relations between the Scandinavian-Baltic region states and Ukraine: military-political and economic dimensions // Journal of International Analytics. 2017. No. 4. P. 18–27

torial integrity and security”.⁴⁹ Sweden declared in a statement: “Since Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Sweden has provided military, humanitarian and civil support to support Ukraine. Together with the EU, Sweden has also adopted macroeconomic support and several sanctions packages against Russia.”⁵⁰ Swedish scholar Mats Engström also emphasized the role of NATO for the future security of Sweden: “Solidarity with other Western democracies is a fundamental part of Sweden’s security policy. During the current Russia–Ukraine crisis, NATO states such as the Netherlands have demonstrated their ability to help Sweden defend Gotland from a Russian attack. Such cooperation has been the focus of several recent exercises.”⁵¹ Finland took a similar position. “Finland strongly condemns Russia’s military actions in Ukraine. Finland firmly supports Ukraine’s independence, sovereignty, self-determination and territorial integrity. Finland closely monitors Russia’s actions and the security situation in Europe, and will respond to Russia’s actions as part of the European Union.”⁵² Finland and Sweden’s next step was to submit their applications for NATO membership, which was not exactly sending a friendly message to Russia.

On September 28, 2022, Zbigniew Rau, Poland’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, released the following statement: “Russian aggression against Ukraine triggered a tectonic shift in the transatlantic area. It initiated unprecedented solidarity among the nations of a free world to defend sovereignty and democracy in Ukraine. In the face of this war, Poland was the first to help Ukraine. We became her closest frontline partner, humanitarian supplier, and logistical hub. Not only are we the first among the European allies to send military donations to Ukraine, but we are second behind the United States in all military support.”⁵³ Such response was to be expected, and fell perfectly in line with typical Polish rhetoric.

Similar to its other like-minded Baltic neighbors, Denmark has also “been providing military, humanitarian and financial support to Ukraine following Russia’s invasion.”⁵⁴ Though Denmark has sought to present itself as an injured party which suffered from Russia’s actions, noting that “the level of cyber threats against Denmark has increased, and the war has also affected energy supplies, leading to greater risks of power shortages, among other things.”⁵⁵

Germany, facing tougher choices given its strong economic and energy relations with Russia, still sided with the anti-Russian policy measures. On February 27,

⁴⁹ Baltic States Are Gearing Up for Armed Conflict with Russia // BBC.
URL: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-60522259>

⁵⁰ Russia’s invasion of Ukraine // Government Offices of Sweden.
URL: <https://www.government.se/government-policy/russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>

⁵¹ Engström M. How the Russia-Ukraine crisis could change Sweden’s security policy // European Council on Foreign Relations. URL: <https://ecfr.eu/article/how-the-russia-ukraine-crisis-could-change-swedens-security-policy/>

⁵² Q&A on Russian invasion of Ukraine // BusinessFinland.fi. URL: <https://www.businessfinland.fi/4959e0/globalassets/finnish-customers/news/news/2022/visit-finland-qa-on-russia-ukraine-crisis.pdf>

⁵³ Poland and the War in Ukraine: A Conversation with Zbigniew Rau, Poland’s Minister of Foreign Affairs // Center for Strategic and International Studies.
URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/poland-and-war-ukraine-conversation-zbigniew-rau-polands-minister-foreign-affairs>

⁵⁴ The war affects Denmark // Kriseinformation.dk. Danish Authority Information.
URL: <https://en.kriseinformation.dk/war>

⁵⁵ Ibid.

2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz made a speech, stating that “Russia’s invasion constituted a turning point (Zeitenwende) in European history, as he detailed plans for a radical break with Germany’s traditional Russia policy (Ostpolitik). He also announced a massive increase in defense spending, breaking with post-Cold War tradition of underfunding the military (in comparison to the NATO two per cent target).”⁵⁶ On the other hand, a closer look at Germany’s public opinion reveals quite a mixed sentiment. In a study by the Center for Monitoring, Analysis, and Strategy (CeMAS), it concluded that approval ratings for pro-Russian conspiracy theories among the German population have overall increased throughout the crisis. In April 2022, 12 percent agreed with the statement that NATO had provoked Russia until Russia had to take drastic measures. In October, 19 percent were already of this opinion, 16 percent of them in western Germany and 33 percent in eastern Germany. The opinion that Ukraine is part of Russia was shared by 12 percent in the west and 24 percent in the east.⁵⁷ These responses suggest that for some German citizens, the switch from being partners in a mutually beneficial relationship to a radical anti-Russia campaign has been quite painful.

Regarding public opinion, in May 2022, the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) conducted a Europe-wide survey that included the Baltic Sea region. It revealed that while Europeans were unified in their condemnation of Russia’s actions and their desire to break relations with Russia, they were deeply divided about how they saw the conflict ending.⁵⁸ First, there are the northern and eastern hawks (Estonia, Poland, Denmark, and Great Britain), where most people strongly support Kyiv’s objectives to Russia. Secondly, there is the ambiguous west (France, Germany, Spain, and Portugal), where opinions are divided on how the conflict should end. In fact, they split evenly between one group that believed that “it was most important that the conflict ended as soon as possible, even if that meant Ukraine making concessions to Russia” and the other group with “a clear preference for Ukraine to regain all of its territory, even if it means a longer conflict or more Ukrainians being killed and displaced.”⁵⁹ Lastly, “there are the southern weak links (Italy and Romania), where the preference for the conflict to end as soon as possible has the upper hand.”⁶⁰ The next poll conducted by the ECFR in January 2023 in ten European countries (Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Spain) demonstrates that Europeans are surprisingly united in their determination to support Kiev’s independence.⁶¹

The key implication of these findings is that Russia’s actions will not harness support among the Baltic Sea states. This position will affect all of Russia’s regional

⁵⁶ Mutreja I. Blumenau B. How Russia’s invasion changed German foreign policy // Chatham House.
URL: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/11/how-russias-invasion-changed-german-foreign-policy>

⁵⁷ Schwarz K.-P. Understanding Germany’s half-hearted support of Ukraine // GIS reports.
URL: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/germany-russia-ukraine/>

⁵⁸ Krastev I. Leonard M. Fragile unity: Why Europeans are coming together on Ukraine (and what might drive them apart) // European Council on Foreign Relations.
URL: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/fragile-unity-why-europeans-are-coming-together-on-ukraine/>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

activities and initiatives that will face resistance from its neighbors. Moreover, it would be fair to say that most Baltic countries will regard their security as invariably linked with the possibility of an open confrontation with Russia. In this climate, any discussions of potential security cooperation projects or opportunities appear futile. On the other hand, there is also public opinion to be reckoned with. While it is mostly anti-Russian, there are still parts that hold anti-NATO sentiments and share a willingness to end the conflict in Ukraine as soon as possible. At this stage, though, it is hard to be optimistic and expect any improvements in the region. Reaching a settlement is bound to be a long and challenging process.

Kaliningrad: Security Concerns

The Kaliningrad Oblast is a unique region of the Russian Federation in terms of both geography and security in the Baltic Sea region. Kaliningrad, due to its physical and political position as an exclave, is held hostage to Russia's relations with the EU and NATO. In political terms, Kaliningrad is a federal region of the Russian Federation and an integral part of Russia. At the same time, it is closely linked with the Baltic Sea community through joint projects and programs and, specifically, with the European Union.

The position and modus operandi of the Kaliningrad Oblast have always given rise to controversy and debate. From the Western standpoint, according to Polish scholar Krzysztof Żęgota, "the attitude of the Russian authorities toward the Kaliningrad region is based on the claim that it makes up an integral and significant part of the Russian Federation, particularly from the point of view of national defense and security. All discussions held over the last dozen years or so concerning the special status of the region or the need to introduce economic privileges take into account the inseparability of relations between the region and "big" Russia."⁶² The researcher notes that "a factor which clearly places the Kaliningrad region among the crucial regions of Russia from a geopolitical point of view is its military character. The Kaliningrad region makes up a part of the North-West Federal District and the Western Military District of Russia. The region is also an important component of the Baltic Naval Zone, which protects the Russian military presence in the Baltic Sea basin. The region is characterized by developed military infrastructure, based on a system of land, air and naval military bases. A significant element of this infrastructure is the Russian Baltic Fleet, with naval bases in Baltiysk, Primorsk and Kaliningrad."⁶³

Admittedly, NATO's eastern expansion has put the region in a precarious position where Kaliningrad had to be viewed primarily as a critical strategic outpost in the Baltic Sea region. This has become a major aspect in terms of developing Kaliningrad, including its economy. Today, however, the Kaliningrad question not only touches upon issues of national security. Back in 2016, Nikolay Patrushev, Secretary of the RF Security Council, speaking at a session in Svetlogorsk (Kaliningrad Oblast), said: "The economy of the Kaliningrad Oblast is facing major challenges, largely driven by its dependence on imports of raw materials and energy, limited home consumer market, lack of innovation resources, and low borrowing power of local enterprises."⁶⁴ Transport and logistics are a separate security issue, which has become particularly acute after the escalation in Ukraine. For example, "in 2021, 50% of cargoes made their way to the Kaliningrad Oblast by rail,

⁶² Żęgota K. Kaliningrad Region – Key to Security in East-Central Europe // WEEReview. 2016. VI. P. 121–136.
URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309284998_The_Kaliningrad_Region_-_Key_to_Security_in_East-Central_Europe

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Nikolay Patrushev on Key Threats to Kaliningrad // WWW.KALININGRAD.KP.RU.
URL: <https://www.kaliningrad.kp.ru/daily/26544/3561419/>

40 % by sea, and 10 % by road and air.”⁶⁵ But on July 18, 2022, Lithuania stopped railway transit to Kaliningrad through its territory. The ban applied to Russian cargoes sanctioned by the European Union.⁶⁶ According to Ivan Timofeev, Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council, “at this point, Lithuania’s government will most likely invoke provisions that prohibit the transportation of iron and steel products, and also items under Annex XXI, which includes fertilizers, articles of wood, and caviar”⁶⁷ (Annex XXI to Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia’s actions destabilizing the situation in Ukraine – N. Markushina).⁶⁸

Thus, Kaliningrad’s sea route appears to be one of the only remaining options. But, according to Oleg Chernov who Chairman of the Board of Directors at the Baltic Metallurgical Company (BMK), “along with the cost, this may increase the duration of deliveries by sea.”⁶⁹ Oboronlogistics LLC, on the other hand, is quite optimistic regarding the operations along the Ust-Luga–Baltiysk ferry line. According to its press service, “the full use of the ferry line capacity in both ways considerably increases its efficiency and ensures transport security and stability of cargo flows between the Kaliningrad Oblast and Russian mainland.”⁷⁰

However, the situation still remains difficult. While Russia has a tentative plan for how to deal with growing hardships (at least, in terms of countermeasures), there is no certainty that these steps will prevent conflict escalation in the Baltic Sea region.

Some issues were quite predictable, given the growing anti-Russian rhetoric, especially in energy security. According to Russian expert Stanislav Mitrakhovich, “it has long been clear that the Russian exclave might be exposed to high risks due to the changing behavior of the Baltic states, so action was taken in advance to prepare for such scenarios. Power plants have been built by Rosneftgaz: a gas-fired and a backup coal-fired facility. Natural gas can be supplied using the Marshal Vasilevsky floating LNG terminal.”⁷¹

⁶⁵ Kaliningrad Blockade: How Could Russia Respond to Lithuania // RIA Novosti. June 21, 2022.
URL: <https://ria.ru/20220621/litva-1796853268.html?ysclid=lfdto5c2t1296520445>

⁶⁶ What Cargos Have Been Banned for Transit Through Lithuania / P. Khimshiashvili, E. Lamova, E. Vinogradova, M. Ovsyannikova // RBC. June 20, 2022.
URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/20/06/2022/62b06bc29a7947449e062cf5?ysclid=lfdtzutzuq661289817>

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ COUNCIL REGULATION (EU) 2022/879 of 3 June 2022 amending Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia’s actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine // EUR-Lex. Access to European Union law & an official website of the European Union.
URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32022R0879>

⁶⁹ Transit Shipments Derailed. What Options Are Available for Getting Goods to Kaliningrad // Kommersant. August 16, 2022.
URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5513916>

⁷⁰ Ust-Luga–Baltiysk Ferry Line Oversubscribed Both Ways // INTERFAX. August 5, 2022.
URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/855478>

⁷¹ Kireev E. All Measures Taken: Lithuania Is No Longer Able to Harm Kaliningrad’s Energy Security // RUBALTIC.ru. June 28, 2022.
URL: <https://www.rubaltic.ru/article/ekonomika-i-biznes/20220628-vse-mery-prinyaty-litva-ne-sposobna-navredit-energobezopasnosti-kaliningrada/?ysclid=lfdeh1fis654648418>

With full blown sanction wars raging on, it is hard to foresee all possible security issues that may arise around Kaliningrad. The biggest danger is still the way Russia's neighbors in the Baltic Sea region position the Russian exclave. Western political experts believe that Kaliningrad "might become a specific tool Russian authorities use to threaten Baltic Sea Region states, as they do in relation to other exclaves and separatist regions in the post-soviet space."⁷² However, western scholars are very unlikely to listen to Russian scholars. According to Russian expert Yury Zverev, "Kaliningrad has considerably fewer troops and weapons today than it had in the 1990s. The current efforts of Russia to strengthen and modernize its military force is a response to similar activities carried out by Poland itself and other NATO members, mainly the United States."⁷³ Unfortunately, hardly any Baltic Sea countries, would take heed of the fact that the actions taken by Russia are inherently defensive and have no intention to violate international treaties. Nevertheless, the West is used to viewing the Kaliningrad Oblast as a real threat to the Baltic Sea region. This perception is particularly manifested in statements made by Western military commanders. In the words of Jeffrey Harrigan, commander of US Air Forces in Europe, "if we have to go in there to take down, for instance, the Kaliningrad IADS [Integrated Air Defense System], let there be no doubt we have a plan to go after that."⁷⁴ Captain Daniel Ince, an intelligence officer assigned to the 353rd Combat Training Squadron at Eielson AFB, AK, said: "With the increase of Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014 and the lessons learned that have stemmed from that conflict, the North American Treaty Organization (NATO) leaders have become more concerned about a Russian incursion into the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia and the Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) capabilities that Russia could bring to that conflict."⁷⁵ Apparently, these words reflect more than just the personal views of a few officers in the Western armed forces. Such ideas surely lead to considerable speculations over security matters among Kaliningrad's neighbors. The long-established opinion among the younger generation of Western scholars is that "even such activities as the 2017 ZAPAD exercises with Belarus reveal a strong tendency towards military projection into the former Soviet dominions."⁷⁶ That is why Poland's response, which is generally consistent with the aggressive policy carried out before, was unsurprising. On 17 March 2023, Polish Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defense Polish Defense Mariusz

⁷² Żegota K. Kaliningrad Region – Key to Security in East-Central Europe // WEEReview. 2016. VI. P. 121-136.
URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309284998_The_Kaliningrad_Region_-_Key_to_Security_in_East-Central_Europe

⁷³ Zverev Yu. What Poland's New National Security Strategy Means for Russia and Belarus // Eurasia. Expert. May 31, 2020.
URL: <https://eurasia.expert/cto-oznachaet-novaya-strategiya-natsbezopasnosti-polshi/>

⁷⁴ Freedberg Jr. Sydney J. Target, Kaliningrad: Air Force Puts Putin on Notice // Breaking Defense. September 17, 2019.
URL: <https://breakingdefense.com/2019/09/target-kaliningrad-eucom-puts-putin-on-notice>

⁷⁵ Capt Daniel Ince. The Russian Antiaccess/Area Denial Security Issue over Kaliningrad and the Baltics // Wild Blue Yonder Air University.
URL: <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Wild-Blue-Yonder/Articles/Article-Display/Article/2659250/the-russian-antiaccessarea-denial-security-issue-over-kaliningrad-and-the-balti/>

⁷⁶ Vasquez J., Akturan O. B., Shura A., Li Y., Rajski M., Sarkes O., Castro A. Exposed Outpost Russian Threats to Baltic Security and Transatlantic Responses // European Horizons.
URL: <https://voices.uchicago.edu/euchicago/exposed-outpost-russian-threats-to-baltic-security-and-transatlantic-responses/>

Blaszczak declared that “Poland intends to place first HIMARS rocket systems supplied by the United States near its border with Russia’s Kaliningrad Region.”⁷⁷ Blaszczak also said “that apart from this, the division will receive K2 tanks and K9 artillery systems purchased from South Korea.”⁷⁸ This is all to supposedly protect Poland from a Russian attack. In turn, the Russian government guaranteed security to residents in the Kaliningrad Oblast. According to Dmitry Lyskov, Director of Kaliningrad’s Press Service, “residents of the region need not worry about HIMARS being deployed in Poland. Although HIMARS obviously has offensive capability, the people living in the region have nothing to fear. They are safe and secure under the strong protection of the Baltic Fleet and Russian Armed Forces.”⁷⁹

Of course, it is challenging to cover all the security nuances and vulnerabilities related to the Kaliningrad region. Russia’s neighbors in the Baltic Sea will surely exploit all opportunities to disseminate anti-Russian rhetoric. It would be safe to expect that in their policy towards Kaliningrad, the Baltic States are unlikely to follow a rational approach, thus further fueling tensions in the region.

⁷⁷ Poland to Station First HIMARS Units Near Kaliningrad Border // Izvestia. March 17, 2023. URL: <https://iz.ru/1484797/2023-03-17/polsha-razmestit-pervye-himars-u-granitcy-kaliningradskoi-oblasti>

⁷⁸ Rogozyansky A. Kaliningrad Authorities Say Citizens Need Not Worry About HIMARS in Poland // Gazeta.ru. March 17, 2023. URL: <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2023/03/17/19991965.shtml>

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Escalation Management Options: Factors for Instability and Uncertainty

Currently, Russia has been isolated in the Baltic Sea region and the EU and NATO are unlikely to change their position on this matter. This pulls all the parties involved into an escalating security dilemma: should the West follow its irrational path and further escalate the conflict by accelerating Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO, or should it make the rational decision to favor a negotiations-based approach, a most tedious task, with all matters considered.

The most dangerous element within the security dilemma concerns Ukraine's NATO membership status. Most NATO member states realize that Ukraine's accession to the Alliance would automatically trigger Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that "if a NATO Ally is the victim of an armed attack, each and every other member of the Alliance will consider this act of violence as an armed attack against all members and will take the actions it deems necessary to assist the Ally attacked."⁸⁰ This explains the unwillingness of certain NATO members to see Ukraine in their ranks. It is also important to understand that "the actions it deems necessary" may not necessarily imply the beginning of a large-scale war. Perhaps, it would be merely the continuation of the support that NATO countries have already been providing to Ukraine. Yet, the issue of Ukraine's future, or rather, its potential NATO membership, does indeed create additional risks for Russia.

Keeping this in mind, it is also imperative to question the bigger picture: who really gains from further escalation? Returning to the previous subject, how is the Baltic Sea region's security structured and who are the major players? Is alignment with the U.S more promising than that of Russia? Surely, at this stage, no one will follow Russia, putting under question future regional sustainable development projects, including regional energy policies. The Nord Stream 1 and 2 projects are perfect examples of that.

Sanctions imposed by the European Union have harmed both sender and target states. In this context, there can be no stability in the Baltic Sea region. More so, some international institutions have gone out of their way to add fuel to the fire, like the International Criminal Court in the Hague when it issued arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova.⁸¹ Russia is not party to the Rome Statute and the ICC has no jurisdiction over Russia, but it still creates additional inter-state tensions, especially when threats of a presidential arrest are voiced by countries like Germany. German Justice Minister Marco Buschmann even said: "I expect the ICC to quickly contact Interpol as well as participating states and ask them to comply with the demand. Germany will then be obliged to arrest President Putin

⁸⁰ Collective defence and Article 5 // NATO website.
URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm

⁸¹ The Hague's ICC issues arrest warrants against Putin and Lvova-Belova // RBC. March 17, 2023.
URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/17/03/2023/641486bf9a79479594d1fb8a>

when he enters German territory and hand him over to the ICC.”⁸² Other countries in the Baltic Sea region could also be expected to follow suit and support the idea of arresting the head of the Russian state.

The situation around Kaliningrad also continues to be fraught. Lithuania’s constant eagerness to ramp up tensions in the region using any excuse available, from transportation to energy issues, is proof of such.

It is unclear how the Council of the Baltic Sea States is going to discuss major security issues without Russia. This will only lead to more instability in the region because there are many problems that cannot be resolved without Russia in attendance. The fragmentation of the policy-making process will only wreak havoc in terms of the deteriorating relations between neighbors.

To dial down the rate of escalation, countries can always resort to conducting negotiations that consider the interests and positions of the participating parties. Sadly, the practical application of this approach to overcome regional problems must be considered only as a long-term, if not an impossible, prospect. It would be reasonable to assume that Russia, on the one side, and the European Union and NATO, on the other, need start a dialogue on the most critical security issues. Ukraine is also part of Europe, but the key question here is whether this state is currently driving its political agenda, or whether it is being driven by others? Today, finding areas of peace and cooperation are absolutely central to the future stability of the Baltic Sea region.

⁸² German Justice Minister: Putin to Be Arrested If He Enters Germany // RIA Novosti. March 19, 2023.
URL: <https://ria.ru/20230319/putin-1858884768.html?ysclid=iffjqncv9z717086186>

Conclusions and Recommendations

The current situation in the Baltic region could be described as a real challenge and one that is exceedingly difficult to overcome. The conflict in Ukraine has virtually divided the political history of the Baltic region into how things were structured “before” and “after” the conflict. This has already been accepted as an axiom of international relations. Surely, there is no coming back to the balance of power structure that had existed prior to the Ukraine crisis. NATO’s Sweden and Finland enlargement would fundamentally favor a pro-US alignment in the Baltic region, thus destroying the previous forms of cooperation Russia once had. The European Union wielded sanctions as a demonstrative tool to show its serious intent to support Ukraine, and to justify its tough stance against Russia. Since most Baltic countries are NATO and EU members, it would be naïve to expect that any of the states in these organizations would dare to steer their foreign policy an inch off from contemporary western orthodoxy. In fact, the situation solidifies a serious impasse and the notion of there being a “Russian threat” will remain to be an underlying component to international relations in the region.

At this point, the Russian Federation should focus more on the security of Kaliningrad to ensure the complete protection of the region and maintain a stable quality of life for its residents.

Surely, the West will carry on spreading its anti-Russian rhetoric on multiple fronts. The only way for Russia to turn the situation around would be to reach out directly to the European public, if there is a willingness to soften their attitude and change their opinion about Russia.

The best outcome for the given situation is where the state of affairs – in spite of the degrading relations between Russia and the Baltic countries – stays within the existing paradigm without spiraling into further escalation. The Cold War showed that a geopolitical standoff can last for decades. One of the options to repair cooperation could be to bring Russia back to the Council of the Baltic Sea States and gradually restore contacts with the countries in the region. Engaging with Baltic non-governmental organizations can also be worthwhile. At this point, such actions would face various hurdles, the greatest being the immense anti-Russian sentiments shared among Russia’s Baltic neighbors.

Russia definitely has its work cut out in trying to establish a dialogue (as well as answer the question of whether there is any need to do so) with its ex-partners in the Baltic region, a task made all the harder by the relentless position its neighboring states have taken on the Ukraine question. Today, it is clear that any further development in the Baltic region will depend on stabilizing the situation in Ukraine and bring the conflict to an end. This is the only plausible option in which states can set aside differences, resume cooperation and build a new security system in the region.

About the Author

Natalya Markushina – Doctor of Political Sciences, Professor at the Department of World Politics, Faculty of International Relations, St. Petersburg State University; Director of World Politics Master’s Program, St. Petersburg State University. Her academic portfolio contains over 50 research publications and instructional materials in both Russian and English. Dr. Markushina is a contributor to and organizer of several national and international research conferences.

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Russian International Affairs Council

**THE CHANGING SECURITY CONFIGURATION AND BALANCE OF POWER
IN THE BALTIC REGION: IMPLICATIONS FOR RUSSIA**

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Tel.: +7 (495) 225 6283
Fax: +7 (495) 225 6284
welcome@russiancouncil.ru

119049, Moscow,
8, 4th Dobryninsky pereulok

russiancouncil.ru