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EU and NATO Membership for the Baltic States: A Realistic Chance or a Vision?

On the eve of the millennium, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are honing plans for membership in the European Union and NATO. While anticipating a safe and prosperous future among the Western democracies, they also want to prevent a recurrence of the past. The citizenry still remembers 23 August 1999, the anniversary of two events that altered the history of their countries in the twentieth century: one presaged the beginning and the other – the end of 51 years of foreign occupation. The Balts recalled the non-aggression pact between Hitler and Stalin of 23 August 1939 and its secret protocols. These accords divided Europe into Nazi German and Soviet spheres of influence, paved the way for World War II and led to nearly a half century of Soviet rule of their countries. The Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians also remembered the Baltic Way of 23 August 1989. On this day about two million Balts joined hands in a 600-kilometer-long chain linking Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius to protest against the infamous pact and its consequences and to affirm their dream of freedom. This demonstration also characterized the Baltic efforts to restore peacefully the independent and democratic republics proclaimed in 1918. In August 1991, while Moscow was in the throes of a failing putsch, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania reclaimed their independence.

Subsequently, the Baltic States created from scratch the institutions underpinning a sovereign state. The manifold tasks ranged from restructuring the economy to prevailing upon Russia to withdraw the former Soviet troops. Their foreign policy priority became admission in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. They see EU and NATO membership as complementary; each organization, albeit in different ways, can:

- help safeguard the sovereignty of the restored Baltic States;
- provide the environment and support needed for a democracy to thrive; and
- confirm that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have indeed "returned to Europe."

To expand upon the last point: the Balts see membership in the EU and NATO as a cachet of their European identity, whether in the realm of culture, politics, economy, or security. At the same time, belonging to these organizations means not only partaking of Europe's wealth and knowledge, but also sharing its duties and burdens, and assisting in its future development. Furthermore, EU and NATO membership is a signal to the rest of the world that the Baltics belong neither to a "gray zone" where one is at the mercy of the ambitions of the more powerful, nor to Moscow's security domain; and the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the mindset it fostered have been relegated forever to history.

No Easy Answer

After close to a decade of independence the question arises: what is the likelihood of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania becoming full-fledged members of the EU and NATO in the foreseeable future? The answer depends on where and of whom the question is asked. The governments in Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius reply that the chances are good because the two organizations have adopted a policy of eastward enlargement and have recognized Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as bona fide or potential candidates for membership; and the Baltic States are making steady progress in fulfilling the membership criteria. In December 1997 the European Council of Heads of State and Government in Luxembourg invited Estonia to start EU accession negotiations; Latvia and Lithuania expect similar invitations from the Council

meeting in Helsinki in December 1999. Estonia aims to join the EU in 2003 and Latvia and Lithuania – soon thereafter.

In April 1999 NATO acknowledged the Baltic States as aspiring members but did not say when the next aspirants would be asked to join the Alliance. Thus, the Baltic States are awaiting the invitation. In the meanwhile they will make the most of NATO's programs of military and security cooperation. Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius believe that all these programs, whether under the aegis of NATO or countries working with NATO, will strengthen the security of the Baltic States and raise their chances of NATO membership. Estonian Prime Minister Mart Laar said in August 1999 that his country wants to be ready for NATO membership by the year 2002, while in July Commander in Chief of the Lithuanian Defense Forces Jonas Kronkaitis stated in Moscow that Lithuania will join NATO in 2001.[1]

Such announcements reflect the Baltic leaders' determination to realize their countries' goals and their wish to predispose the course of events, but they do not necessarily preview the future. NATO and EU enlargement proceeds "by invitation only." The interests of the organization and its members take precedence over the worthiness or eagerness of a candidate. Thus, newcomers are invited and admitted when the current member states agree to do so.

In the European and North American capitals the question of the Baltics joining the EU and NATO elicits various responses: a general accord with their entry into the EU, but no consensus on their admission into NATO – some policy-makers oppose it, while others see it as necessary and logical. The divergent views and the lack of even a tentative enlargement schedule reveal that many issues are not resolved. The issues stem from three directions: the organizations, the candidates and the outside. Thus, to answer the basic question more fully, let us consider the readiness of the EU and NATO to admit the Baltic States, the preparedness of the Baltics for EU and NATO membership and the role played by other or external forces, especially the USA and Russia, and the military conflicts in the former Yugoslavia.

Readiness of the EU and NATO for the Baltics

Despite the fact that both the EU and NATO are firmly established entities, they continue to evolve, expand and adjust to the needs of their members and a changing post-Cold War world. In practice this means that some activities are begun before the preliminary preparations have been completed. In 1997 the EU adopted its *Agenda 2000* which outlines its development into the twenty-first century. This voluminous document deals with an enlarged Union, but it does not and cannot cover all the specifics. Thus, there remain crucial issues to be thrashed out, such as the decision-making processes when the Union's membership grows to twenty and more.

A New Strategic Concept was advanced during NATO's fiftieth anniversary meeting in Washington in April 1999. Replacing the 1991 precursor, it espouses both collective defense, which had been heretofore the Alliance's principal *raison d'être*, and collective security or peace-support. This dualistic concept still needs to be refined, since not all members agree on at least three themes: delimitation of NATO's responsibility and authority to act in peace-support operations; the future of the Alliance's eastward enlargement; and more equitable cost-sharing between the USA and the European allies.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, but especially in the wake of the Soviet Union's demise in 1991, both organizations created programs to aid and cooperate with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the former USSR. The EU started its Phare program

1 BNS (Baltic News Service), 18 August 1999 and Vremya MN, as cited by BNS, 5 July 1999.

already in 1989 and formally decided to offer the possibility of membership to the countries of CEE at the European Council meeting in Copenhagen in 1993. NATO opted for enlargement in January 1994 and released a study on the subject in September 1995.

Both organizations took the decisive step eastward in 1997. NATO invited in July the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to open membership negotiations. The EU began in December a two-speed enlargement process. The better prepared candidates – the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia – were asked to start accession negotiations, while Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia were invited to prepare for the negotiations. The strongest candidates are expected to meet the membership conditions in the years 2003-2010, but when the EU might admit them as full-fledged members is unclear. NATO, however, welcomed the three CEE countries into its ranks already in April 1999.

The difference in the pace of admission of new CEE members by the Union and the Alliance is striking. This stems largely from the nature of each organization. The EU is a multi-focus international organization buttressed by myriad institutions and layers of bureaucracy. It is the product of evolution. Hence, the slower making of political decisions, the comprehensive screening of candidates and the convoluted admissions process. Estonia's President Lennart Meri comments: "We are not worried about Estonia, which has succeeded in consuming 80,000 pages of standards, the mere size of which is not the best possible advertisement of free market economy. What I want to say is that the EU expansion strategy needs modernization."[2]

NATO, as a mutual defense and security alliance, was intended to be operative from its inception in 1949. In the 1990s NATO also became a more complex entity because of the number of countries with which it interacts, the differentiated forms of cooperation, and the tasks that it assumed. But this did not result in new membership procedures nor delay the admission of three CEE countries in 1999. At the Washington Summit a Membership Action Plan was adopted to help aspiring members to become the strongest possible candidates for joining the Alliance. This may or may not delay the enlargement process. But admission still requires an invitation, i.e. the allies' political decision that the aspirant's membership in NATO will contribute to overall security.[3]

The Baltic States have not been invited because some allies are not fully convinced of the wisdom of such a step in the foreseeable future. The current debate is more geopolitical and geostrategic than specific to the Baltics' merits as candidates. Fueled especially by Russia's *nyet* to having a NATO member at its frontier, the debate reveals European-US tensions related to USA's strength and Russia's weakness and indicates a need for each ally to redefine its relations with Russia, particularly as they might shape its vision of a future world order.

Both the Union and the Alliance have proposed major foreign policy and defense initiatives that seem to overlap, impact on, or alter existing practices. The proposals include: NATO's European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI); the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP); and several recommendations for the creation of a credible European military capacity that can act independently of NATO and that operates within the framework of the EU.[4] The recommendations prompted former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to question the future of NATO as we know it.[5]

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2 Interfax, 26 August 1999.

3 Address of US Ambassador to NATO Alexander Vershbow, 7 May 1999 at the Center for European Integration Studies, Bonn, Germany.

4 See the French-British accord made in St. Malô, 3-4 December 1998; and the European Council Declaration on Strengthening the Common European Policy on Security and Defense adopted in Köln, 3-4 June 1999.

5 Henry Kissinger, "The End of NATO as We Know It?" The Washington Post, 15 August 1999.

More reassessments of NATO-US-European relations and the world balance of power will surely follow. The debates will intensify, particularly when the discussion turns to money and organizational overstrech. Though necessary for shaping the future of both entities, they should not become a disincentive for enlargement. This is a concern of aspiring members of both the EU and NATO. As President Meri said, "History is now developing faster than politics. Politics is developing faster than the European institutions. The rate at which the EU expands and its willingness to do so show signs of fading. The costs of expansion, which are largely overestimated, are unilaterally overemphasized while the benefits which will in the long term outweigh the costs are underestimated."[6]

Readiness of the Baltic States for EU Membership

Baltic-EU relations date from 27 August 1991, when the European Communities recognized Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as independent states. That recognition came within a week after independence was regained. Six years later the three Baltics were among the 10 CEE candidates vying for Union membership. In July 1997 the European Commission issued a detailed Opinion of the candidates' ability to meet the membership criteria adopted in 1993 in Copenhagen. In brief, a candidate country

- must be a stable democracy;
- have a functioning market economy that can cope with competition; and
- fulfill the obligations of membership (known as *acquis communautaire* or simply *acquis*) – these are wide-ranging, numerous and very comprehensive.

Compared with the other applicants, the Baltics ranked somewhere in the middle. The differences between the three were not great either politically or in their estimated ability to meet the *acquis*. All three showed "the characteristics of a democracy, with stable institutions guaranteeing the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities." Estonia and Latvia, however, were advised to accelerate the naturalization of Russian-speaking non-citizens to enable them to become better integrated into society. Economically, the Baltic States were and are among the poorer aspirants. But having made the transition to a market economy, Estonia was further ahead. This factor, the EU's wish to send a signal of welcome to countries once under Soviet rule and its reluctance to strain its own capacities largely explain why Estonia was included among the 1997 invitees for accession negotiations.[7]

In order to emphasize the policy of inclusiveness and encourage all candidates to keep trying, the Council modified the enlargement procedures, redistributed the aid funds and invited all candidate countries to attend the ceremonial opening of the accession negotiations on 30 March 1998. Moreover, the Commission approved Accession Partnerships (AP's) for Cyprus and all 10 CEE applicants on 25 March 1998. The AP's provide a single framework for dealing with specific issues related to each applicant country's preparations for membership. They provide also the chance – this remains to be confirmed in practice – for a later invitee to the accession negotiations to catch up with or bypass a country already negotiating.

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6 Interfax, 26 August 1999. Hungary shares these concerns and wants the EU to set a timetable for admitting new members (Reuters and BNS, 9 September 1999).

7 Dzintra Bungs, The Baltic States: Problems and Prospects of Membership in the European Union, Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 1998. See also Mathias Jopp and Sven Arnswald, eds., The European Union and the Baltic States, Helsinki: Ulkopoliittinen instituutti and Bonn: Institut für Europäische Politik, 1998: and Heike Graf and Manfred Kerner, eds., Handbuch Baltikum heute, Berlin: Berlin Verlag Arno Spitz, 1998.

In November 1998 the Commission issued its first annual progress report on each candidate country. All three Baltics had forged ahead, but Latvia stood out: "With regard to a future extension of the negotiations, the Commission wishes to highlight the particular progress made by Latvia. If the momentum of change is maintained, it should be possible to confirm next year that Latvia meets the Copenhagen economic criteria and, before the end of 1999, to propose the opening of negotiations."[8] Though Lithuania had also made "considerable progress," the Commission did not hint when an invitation could be extended.

Besides praise for achievements, each report contains many suggestions for betterment. Noting that Latvia's progress in establishing a market economy augurs well for coping with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union in the medium term, the report also advises simplifying the legal environment for enterprises and strengthening the administrative capacity in agriculture, intellectual and industrial property, customs and tax administration, and home affairs. Lithuania's report recommends finishing the reforms for establishing a functioning market economy. Vilnius is also urged to draft a medium-term economic strategy that provides a coherent macroeconomic framework for implementing structural reforms as well as a comprehensive long term energy strategy that includes the closure of Ignalina power plant.

Estonia's political institutions work smoothly, the report said, but "it is regrettable that the Parliament has not adopted amendments to the citizenship law to allow stateless children to become citizens." As a market economy, "Estonia should be able to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union in the medium term, provided that prudent macroeconomic management continues to limit the risks associated with its large external imbalances." The fine general assessment is followed by a list of desired improvements.

All three Baltic aspirants must continue to harmonize their legislation and standards with those of the EU, as well as strengthen and reform both their judiciary and public administration. They should also increase the supervision of the financial sector. Estonia and Latvia are advised to promote more the learning of the state language among non-citizens. But Latvia and Lithuania are urged to maintain macroeconomic stability, pursue the fight against corruption, and get on with the privatization of state enterprises.

Subsequently major efforts have been made to eliminate these shortcomings. Since the advances have been uneven, the overall assessment in the 1999 report will be mixed. A detrimental factor has been the decline of the Baltic economies. In mid-1999 the national budgets were cut and the projected GDP's revised downward – the 1999 figure will show a tiny rise over the one for 1998. The slowdown stems mainly, but not exclusively, from the ripple effects of the August 1998 financial crisis in Russia. The Baltics reported the first signs of recovery in September 1999. Though the setbacks of 1998-1999 may draw criticism for the fledgling market economies, a more positive appraisal is also possible: the Baltics showed resilience as well as the ability to cope with adversity and learn from it. This may persuade Brussels of the economic readiness of Latvia and Lithuania to start EU accession negotiations.

The other problem areas noted in the 1997 Opinions and the 1998 progress reports are more country-specific. When considering Lithuania's candidature, the EU authorities will ask what has been done toward closing the Soviet-era nuclear power plant in Ignalina. Operated by three Chernobyl-type reactors, the plant provides energy both for domestic use and export. Vilnius has not found a viable alternative to Ignalina and it does not have the money for a shutdown. Vilnius has tried to uncouple the Ignalina issue from the conditions for EU membership; so far its arguments have not convinced Brussels. While the EU does not expect

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8 Composite Paper [from the] Reports on progress towards accession by each of the candidate countries, Brussels: 4 November 1998. Subsequent quotations from the country reports are not separately footnoted. See Internet: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg1a/enlarge/report_11_98_en/>.

Lithuania alone to finance the shutdown, it does seek a firm commitment to decommission Ignalina. On 9 September 1999 the Lithuanian government endorsed a national energy strategy which stipulates starting to take out of operation Ignalina's first reactor in 2005. This decision was lauded by the EU Commission and it will be taken into account when the EU leaders invite more candidates to start accession negotiations.

In Estonia and Latvia, the Commission will scrutinize the naturalization and integration of the Russian-speaking non-citizens and the opportunities for them to learn Estonian or Latvian.[9] Upholding the view that a country's democratic foundations are secured by an integrated population of whom the majority are citizens, the EU has been encouraging the naturalization of the Russian-speakers in Estonia and Latvia.

When the Baltic States regained their independence, they abided by the notion of legal continuity and reinstated the republics that had been proclaimed in 1918. Hence,

- Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian were reconfirmed as state languages and Russian reverted back to being a minority language;
- Estonian, Latvian, or Lithuanian citizenship was restored, upon presentation of documents, to those who had been citizens of the interwar republics and their descendants.

Concomitantly the legal status of Soviet-era settlers changed: without having moved, they found themselves living in a different country as stateless inhabitants. To regularize their status, they had to obtain a residence permit, and then decide if they wanted to remain aliens or seek citizenship, either of the country where they were living or of another.[10] Many had to consider learning the state language either because it was needed at work or because knowledge of the language is a requirement for Estonian and Latvian citizenship.

Some Russian-speakers have resisted these changes. They retain their USSR passports, even if these become invalid in 2000. They also argue that learning Estonian or Latvian is tantamount to losing their Russian heritage – an opinion spread also by nationalists in Russia. Still offended that Tallinn (or Riga) did not grant them citizenship unconditionally in 1991, they claim that their human rights are being abused. Like many Moscow politicians, they believe that citizenship should have been granted automatically to all residents of a former Soviet republic at the time when it became independent. Their complaints, whether deriving from the differences in the rights of citizens and non-citizens or other causes, find resonance in Moscow. Russian government leaders and politicians, as self-appointed defenders of the human rights of Russian-speakers, publicize the complaints in Russia and abroad so that everyone is aware of the problems and Moscow's concern over them, but they seldom seek their counterparts in Riga or Tallinn with a request to look into the matter. This practice encourages the Russian-speakers to think of Moscow as their champion and could sow seeds of instability in Estonia and Latvia.

Most Russian-speakers, however, have accepted the changes in the Baltics. Many are taking advantage of the growing opportunities to learn the state language and ensuring that

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9 Russian-speakers is a term applied to Soviet-era settlers or their descendants, who are either ethnic Russians or other eastern Slavs who communicate mainly or solely in Russian. Most of them never learned the language of the people among whom they were living since in the USSR Russian was the lingua franca and everyone was expected to know it. Thus, there developed a two-stream society divided along language lines. Owing to Moscow's political, ideological and economic policies, by the time of the 1989 census this group made up 35% of Estonia's, 42% of Latvia's, and 12% of Lithuania's population; the eponymous nationality comprised 61.5% of the population of Estonia, 52% of Latvia, and 79.6% of Lithuania. The large presence of Russian-speakers made Estonians and Latvians fearful of being reduced both physically and culturally to a minority in their historic homeland.

10 With four-fifths of the population being ethnic Lithuanians, Lithuania opted early for generous citizenship laws. Thus, in the mid-1990s over 95% of the country's population were citizens.

their children do the same. With the help of foreign funding – neither Estonia nor Latvia could afford such large-scale projects – subsidized language training programs for adults have been established and more teachers have been trained to instruct Estonian or Latvian as a second language in minority-language schools. These programs need to be expanded.

A positive impetus has come from the national programs to integrate the minorities into the mainstream of society. But most important has been the gradual change in attitude among the Estonians and Latvians themselves. They have come to realize that they can do more for their country by focusing on its present and future than by dwelling on the injustices suffered under Soviet occupation and considering their Russian-speaking neighbors as former invaders and tools of occupation.

Naturalization of Russian-speakers has risen. In 1998 both Estonia and Latvia amended the citizenship law to facilitate naturalization and allow children born in Estonia or Latvia to non-citizens to obtain Estonian or Latvian citizenship. These amendments were welcomed by the OSCE, and will be recognized also by the EU. In 1999 close to 80% of Estonia's and about 75% of Latvia's population were citizens.

Potentially problematic, however, could still be the language laws and their implementation. In July 1999 the Latvian parliament passed a new law, which provoked much controversy. After consulting with OSCE's Max van der Stoel and other experts, the president sent the law back for review: some points were unclear and others did not conform with international standards. The parliament will take up the law in December, just before European Council convenes in Helsinki. Nordic leaders have signaled that Latvia's chances of being invited to start EU accession negotiations would improve upon the adoption of a language law that meets international norms.

The Estonian language law also came under fire in 1999. Aware of the OSCE and EU views on the recent amendments, Tallinn chose a compromise response: it postponed the enforcement of the required level of knowledge of Estonian in various professions. Such a reaction shows that Tallinn seeks to remove quietly and efficiently all obstacles to its goal of EU membership. Thus, Estonia's difficulties with some EU requirements – including those on environment, taxes, trade accords, crime-fighting and customs – are aired mainly among specialists, rather than in the press. In July 1999 Estonia had submitted position papers on 23 of the 31 chapters of the *acquis* to the EU presidency; it will surely submit the remainder on schedule. Some Estonians and Lithuanians have asked if EU membership does not necessitate amendments to their constitutions. This point is being studied by legal experts. Because of the time required for constitutional amendments, there is a very remote chance that Estonia will not be ready to join the EU as planned, that is by 1 January 2003. As for Latvia and Lithuania, the caveats are too many to proffer a date when they will be ready join the EU; but if all goes well, then a few years after Estonia.

Readiness of the Baltic States for NATO Membership

NATO-Baltic cooperation began also in 1991. It has flourished rapidly, especially after the inaugural on 20 December 1991 of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, the precursor of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are participating in numerous NATO activities, most notably the Partnership for Peace and the Membership Action Plan.[11]

11 For detailed information of Baltic preparations for NATO membership, see the appropriate file in the foreign policy section of the foreign ministry sites in Internet: Estonia < http://www.vm.ee/eng/ >; Latvia: <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/eng/policy/security/NATO> and Lithuania: <http://www.kam.lt.balta/contents.html>.

Asked about NATO membership requirements, Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe Wesley Clark said in Riga: "there are no preconditions of a military nature for the countries wishing to join NATO, there are other considerations, mainly political."[12] Though NATO has not published a list of criteria, at the minimum, the prospective members must

- uphold democracy, including tolerance for diversity and respect for human rights;
- be progressing toward a market economy;
- have their military forces under firm civilian control;
- be good neighbors and respect the sovereignty of other states; and
- work toward interoperability with NATO forces.[13]

Some of the criteria are the same as those of the EU. But NATO also favors providers of security. In this context, a prospective member's ability to defend its home turf is taken into consideration, even if this is not a formal requirement for membership.

Danish Lieutenant General K. Hillingsø notes that while "Most of these conditions have already been met or will be met by the Baltic States in the near future," the Baltic armed forces' ability to defend their land remains problematic, especially since the only country that might contemplate an invasion is Russia.[14] This could be an insurmountable obstacle: opponents to Baltic membership of NATO believe that the Baltic forces can never attain such a capability; and that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are indefensible; and this would be a detriment to fulfilling the mutual defense obligations under Article 5 of NATO's founding treaty. Other experts, however, maintain that no country in the world can be successfully defended against all threats and that the real deterrent is the will of the people to defend themselves.

Aware of their dilemma, the Baltics have been working to create NATO-standard defense forces that are *klein aber fein.* Their focus is on interoperability, cooperation and joint education, since geostrategically the Baltic States are a single area. Having to start from scratch with meager resources, building the defense forces has been a daunting task. The work has been complicated by the low esteem of the population for the military – a view dating from Soviet times but perpetuated more recently by undisciplined recruits and less-than-honorable officers. Many shortcomings, including standardization of equipment and low quality of military life, can be corrected through more funds. Although resources are scarce, each Baltic State wants to raise the defense allocation to 2% of the GDP, as recommended to NATO's aspirant countries. Estonia's target year is 2002, Latvia's – 2003 and Lithuania's – 2001.

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12 BNS (Baltic News Service), 29 July 1999.

13 US Department of State Fact Sheet, "Minimum Requirements for NATO Membership," 15 August 1997. See also Gebhardt von Moltke, "Accession of new members to the Alliance: What are the next steps?" NATO Review, 4/1997, pp. 4-9.

14 K.G.H. Hillingsø, "Defensibility" Baltic Defence Review 1/1999, p. 38.

Defense Forces of the Baltic States in 1998-1999

	Estonia	*Latvia*	*Lithuania*
Population	1.445.580	2.432.400	3.701.253
Defense System: persons in			
active service	5.180	5.000	11.000
reserves	12.000	16.000	12.000
Armed Forces			
Army	4.700	2.400	4.300
Navy	350	880	1.200
Air Force	130	150	850
National Guard	12.000	16.000	10.200

Note: All figures above are approximate.

Sources: Data from the Baltic embassies in Germany and *The Military Balance 1998/99*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1999.

In the second half of the 1990s, bilateral, international and inter-Baltic cooperation burgeoned, as shown by BALTBAT, BALTRON, BALTNET and BALTDEFCOL.[15] The Riga-based Baltic Peacekeeping Battalion (BALTBAT) was launched in 1994 with the support of 8 European countries and the USA. Created to contribute to UN peacekeeping efforts, BALTBAT operates under the aegis of Denmark. It consists of some 640 soldiers; Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania each provide a third of the personnel and share in the command structure. Responding to NATO's invitation, in 1998 BALTBAT soldiers served in Denmark's unit of the SFOR in Bosnia and in 1999 also in Kosovo. Participation in the peace-keeping efforts is seen as a chance to show that Baltic soldiers are able and willing to contribute to European security.

The Baltic Naval Squadron (BALTRON) began to operate in 1997 with the backing of 10 European countries. Guidance is provided by Germany. Initially concentrating on mine-sweeping and control of the territorial seas, the Tallinn-based BALTRON will eventually contribute to international peacekeeping missions. In 1998 and 1999 its ships participated in the international naval exercise Open Spirit.

The Baltic Regional Airspace Surveillance Network (BALTNET) becomes operational in 2000. It is based in Kaunas. The international coordination of this project is led by Norway, with assistance from the USA, and aid of Poland, Denmark and Sweden. BALTNET will gather data from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to produce a composite air picture of the region. The system will be fully compatible with those used by NATO.

Visible progress has been made in the education and training of the military, not only at the national level, but regionally as well. On 16 August 1999 the Baltic Defense College in Tartu, Estonia welcomed its first students. It offers a senior-level staff course in line with NATO standards to 32 officers and defense specialists. The first student body consists of 10 officers from Estonia, 8 each from Latvia and Lithuania, and the rest from Sweden, Denmark, USA,

15 See 3 facts sheers on "Baltic Military Cooperation," by Latvia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Internet: <http:www.mfa.gov.lv/eng/policy/security>. Additional information, also on the Lithuanian-Polish peacekeeping battalion (LITPOLBAT) is in the White Paper of Lithuania's Ministry of National Defense; see Internet, <http:www.dam.lt.balta>.

Germany and Hungary. Directed by Danish Brigadier General Michael Clemmesen, the college has an international faculty and its lingua franca is English. Funding comes primarily from the Nordic countries, USA and Germany. While aiming to impart the Nordic total defense concepts and military tactics, the college's curriculum will promote NATO inter-operability of the Baltic defense forces.[16] Other Baltic-wide training centers are also planned: one in Liepaja, Latvia for naval personnel, and another (location not yet known) for non-commissioned officers. Given the very tight Baltic budgets, it is not clear when the schools will open.

The goal of all these activities is to ensure Baltic security through the creation of a credible deterrent in the form of small, modern, rapid-reaction defense forces – possibly 5 mobilizable battalions per country – that can interact in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and are interoperable with NATO forces. Such battalions could make a would-be invader reconsider or even give up his plans. Thus, much work lies ahead for the Baltics on their way to NATO membership. While developing the defense potential, Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius also need to focus on the outside political world: in presenting their case for NATO membership, they should stress more the Balts' will to defend themselves than each country's military capacity.

Other Factors

Reduced to its simplest terms, membership of NATO and the EU depends on the interaction of the organization, the candidate country, and other factors. In the context of Baltic membership of the EU and NATO three unlike factors stand out from the rest: the United States, Russia and the wars in the former Yugoslavia. If the US is an interested and influential outsider vis-à-vis the EU, it is the *force motrice* of NATO, not a factor. Russia is an outsider, despite its special status both with NATO and the EU. Owing to their desire for and degree of involvement – direct or indirect, justified or not – both Washington and Moscow wield much influence on the eastward enlargement of the EU and NATO. The military conflicts in Kosovo and Bosnia and what they have wrought are factors of a different sort: they are events, not political actors. Numerous pessimistic speculations have appeared about their impact on the EU and NATO admission of the Baltics; so far they have remained essentially unsubstantiated. This does not rule out the possibility of both direct and indirect impact manifesting itself later in various –even positive – ways.

The US has consistently upheld Baltic sovereignty. Continuing that tradition is the Clinton administration's support for Estonia's, Latvia's and Lithuania's full integration into the European and transatlantic political, economic, security, and defense institutions. The US-Baltic Charter of 16 January 1998 formalizes this support, reiterates the commonly shared goals and values, and sets a framework for greater cooperation. Though not providing specific security guarantees, the Charter states that Europe will not be fully secure unless the Baltics are secure and adds that the US "welcomes the aspirations and supports the efforts of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuanian to join NATO."[17] The Charter has been followed up by regular meetings, accords, and programs. Conferring with the Baltic foreign ministers on 16 July 1999 in Washington, US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott indicated that despite Russia's strident opposition, Baltic membership of NATO is almost inevitable. He explained: the Baltic States "are not only eligible for membership in the Alliance, they are making very

16 See the articles on the Defense College by Brig. Gen. Michael Clemmesen and Sweden's Defense Minister Björn von Sydow in Baltic Defence Review, 1/1999; Paul Goble, "Transforming Post-Communist Militaries," RFE/RL Newsline, 18 August 1999; and Diena, 24 August 1999.

17 See Internet < http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eur/ch_9801_baltic_charter.html>.

real and concrete progress in that direction. No country should be excluded from eligibility for the Alliance on the grounds of either geography or history."[18]

Moscow's attitude to Baltic membership of NATO and the EU is rooted in history and geography. Russia has dominated its three Baltic neighbors for over two centuries, hence the notion: *nasha Pribaltika* (our Baltics). Considered in this context, Russia's recognition of the independent Baltic States already in August 1991 was remarkable. It seemed to signal a turning point in Baltic-Russian relations. Subsequent developments, however, invalidated the initial optimism. Moscow still considers the Baltics as a sphere of Russia's vital interest, its "near abroad." But Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania do not feel beholden to Moscow. As independent states they want to be good neighbors, not vassals, of Russia. This paradigm of contemporary Baltic-Russian relations is the main reason for the energetic pursuit of EU and NATO membership by the Baltics. Moscow is clearly aware of this and its reactions are mixed.

Russia's attitude to NATO membership for the Baltics remains unequivocally negative. This does not mean that there are no discussions of such a possibility. Hence, the occasional impressions of Baltic leaders that Russia is becoming less opposed to the Baltics' joining NATO and the prompt denial by Moscow. In a nutshell, Russia's objections stem from

- a basic mistrust of NATO – remembered as the bastion of USSR's enemies, it is now depicted as the aggressor in Serbia and potential aggressor elsewhere;
- its own security concerns – Russia does not want NATO members at its frontiers, especially if nuclear tactical missiles might be stationed there;
- fears of marginalization and loss of superpower status – To counteract this, Moscow agreed to the NATO-Russia Council, a consultative body where both sides exchange their views.[19]

Russia's feelings toward the EU are basically positive. There is no deep-seated mistrust or fear either of the organization or its members. Recognizing that the EU is the main architect of tomorrow's Europe, Russia wants to be seen as a European power – not an outsider – and influence the planning and decision-making of the Union. But realizing that it will not qualify for EU membership for some time to come, it uses the opportunities provided by the Russia-European Union Cooperation Council.[20] At the same time, Russia also wants to influence Baltic developments; one way is through the EU. Thus, Russia's attitude toward EU expansion can be described as conditional acquiescence: it will go along with the enlargement in general and Baltic membership of EU in particular if certain conditions are met. Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and other officials have repeated that they favor EU expansion and then added that enlargement should not occur at the expense of Russia's interests. They have suggested a Baltic-Russian Schengen and no external trade barriers with Russia's CEE trading partners who are joining the EU. Hence, they are seeking a special status for Russia.

In the Baltic context, Russia's attitude toward EU enlargement is much more complex. On the one hand, Moscow has stated that it welcomes Baltic membership of the EU since it would serve to improve the situation of Russian-speakers in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Taken at face value, this suggests that Moscow is ready to consider the Russian-speakers in

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18 See Internet <http://www.state.gov/www/policy_remarks/1999/990716_talbott_baltics.html>. Baltic membership of NATO is not universally endorsed in the US. A vocal opponent is former US ambassador to the USSR George F. Kennan (his interview in the New York Review of Books is cited by BNS, 9 August 1999).

19 More on this in the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation, Paris, 27 May 1997 (Internet: <http://www.NATO.INT/docu/basictxt/fndact-a.htm>).

20 This has been updated by the Common Strategy of the European Council on Russia, adopted by the European Council in Köln, 3-4 July 1999; see Internet: <europa.eu.int/rapid/start/c...= gt&doc=PRES/99>.

the Baltics as a Baltic and potentially an EU problem, and no longer a Russian concern; and that Moscow will not hinder the Baltics on their way to the EU. Yet Russian leaders show no sign of giving up either their advocacy of the rights of the Russian-speakers in the former USSR or using this advocacy as an instrument of domestic and foreign policy.[21] Thus, they insist that the signing and ratification of border treaties – seen by some members of the EU and NATO as a prerequisite for admitting the Baltics – depends on "the removal of discriminatory practices which exist in respect of the Russian-speaking population."[22] Cognizant of the value placed on human rights and the rights of minorities in the West, Russia continues to raise alarm over anything that smacks of discrimination of the Russian speakers in the Baltics. Whatever the factual merits of Moscow's allegations, the Baltics have to vindicate themselves: they have to prove that no violations have occurred or that the problem has been properly resolved; they have to convince the rest of the world that no ethnic conflicts are brewing on their territory, and that there is no reason to question the Baltic States as stable democracies. Seen in this light, Moscow's advocacy of the rights of Russian speakers may also be regarded as a tool to delay Baltic admission into the EU and NATO.

What impact the military conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, the peacekeeping activities and the attempts to restore normal life there will have on the Baltic efforts to join the EU and NATO is not clear. Both organizations are deeply involved in trying to solve the numerous problems in the region. The scope of the involvement, its unpredictable duration and costs have raised fears that the current process of expansion of the Union and the Alliance has been derailed and will result in the resetting of priorities and the reallocation of resources in the direction of Europe's Southeast. British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook addressed these issues in Tallinn on 29 July 1999 and said that nobody in the EU feels that the resolution of the Kosovo crisis should be "at the expense of those countries at the front of the accession process" of the EU. In fact, the Kosovo crisis should lead the EU and NATO to open more doors, and the Alliance to accelerate its enlargement, despite Russia's objections. Similar views were voiced a fortnight earlier by US Deputy Secretary of State Talbott.[23]

In the meanwhile, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have sent to the former Yugoslavia and Albania soldiers and policemen to maintain peace and doctors and humanitarian aid to help those who are suffering. The three have also offered to share with Macedonia and the other affected states their know-how in economic reconstruction and work with European institutions. In this way the Baltics are proving themselves as fellow Europeans and contributors to the continent's security. Their assistance has not gone unnoticed by NATO or the EU and may help shorten the path to full membership of the Alliance and the Union.

Conclusion: Where There's a Will, There's a Way

The Baltic States cannot alter their geography, history, or their neighbors, but they can and want to create a safer and more prosperous future for themselves. Having learned from the past, they are building a system of overlapping alliances through active participation in many organizations, including the UN, OSCE and the Council of Baltic Sea States. These affiliations are important but they are no substitute for "the real thing": full membership in the EU and NATO, the organizations that carry the most authority in Europe. With their determination and hard work the Baltics will achieve these goals. The question is not if, but

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21 Russia's Duma discussed again a draft law on instituting economic sanctions against Latvia to prevent abuses of the basic rights of Russians and person of Russian origin living there (Interfax, 10 September 1999).

22 As stated by Russia's Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov in Brussels, RIA-Novosti, 27 January 1998. What those discriminatory practices are has never been specified.

23 On Cook, see BNS, 29 July 1999; on Talbott, see footnote 18.

when. Though they still have homework to do to prove to both the EU and NATO that they can make the grade, this should not be made to seem as the pivotal reason for delaying their invitation or admission. The EU and NATO also have legions of issues to resolve. Nevertheless, amid the sundry problems and considerations, it is the vision of Europe of the twenty-first century and the political will to achieve it that count. Thus, when the EU and NATO decide that they are ready to admit the Baltic States into their ranks, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania will be willing and prepared to join.

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