
GERMAN POLICY TOWARD ESTONIA, LATVIA AND LITHUANIA SINCE 1991 AS AN ELEMENT OF THE BALTIC SEA REGION-BUILDING

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INTRODUCTION AND STRUCTURE

The Baltic Sea Region has been growing together since the end of the East-West-conflict as a political, economic and cultural entity. One of the pre-conditions of this process was the fall of the Communist system and thus a new political structure of the region. The unification of Germany in 1990 resulted in the emerging of a major European power. In 1991 the independence of Estonia (EST), Latvia (LV) and Lithuania (LT) (also called the Baltic States) from the USSR was internationally recognised. The successor of the Soviet Union, Russia, retained only small strips of the coast around Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg, but nevertheless it has remained a key player on the Baltic Sea.

The fact that political division in the Baltic was overcome was the main precondition for the substantial development of a co-operation of regional actors. The shift in the geographical location of Germany made the country become more attentive to the issues of the Baltic region. The mere fact one more coastal region (Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) was created heightened German interest in co-operation with other littoral states in such fields as economics, energy, transport and ecology. The chances and risks of the region became to a larger extent chances and risks for Germany and its society.

The paper tries to sketch the German policy toward the three Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as an element of regional-oriented policy. It will focus on the activity of the Federal government and those of the German Bundesländer, but it will mention activities of non-state actors as well, who often act in fields not 'covered' sufficiently by the policy of the Federal government.

Two levels of the German policy will find consideration:

- 1) Germany's 'interregional' activity in order to integrate new democracies of the Baltic Sea Region into political, economical and military European and transatlantic structures
- 2) German participation in the regional co-operation of littoral states

However, for the understanding of the motives and operational context of these activities it is necessary to outline both historical and actual political premises of the relations between Germany and the three Baltic states.

PREMISES OF GERMAN POLICY TOWARD THE BALTIC STATES

The 20th century history of German-Baltic relations does not give an idyllic picture.¹ The 'Hitler-Stalin-pact', dividing north-eastern Europe between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union put an end to the 20-year period of independence for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The occupation² of the three countries since 1940 by the USSR was temporarily replaced by German occupation in 1941-44. As a result of the war and post-war period, the three republics lost between 25% and 33% of their population.

In spite of its non-recognition of the Soviet annexation after 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany did not undertake concrete measures in favour of the three republics, e.g. in the assembly of the United Nations (which corresponded with the position of most Western states). The ambivalence of the German policy toward the Baltic republics became apparent in the late 1980s during the Baltic struggle for independence: priority was given to good relationships with USSR whose attitude was of crucial importance for the success of Germany's reunification process. Germany recognised formally the independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania only after Russian (secessionist) president Yeltsin did so at the end of August 1991.

¹ Apart of that, there is a long history of German involvement in the Baltic rim, esp. on the area of today's Latvia and Estonia. From the 13th century until the World War I, the provinces of Kurlandia, Livonia and Estonia were governed by the Baltic Germans executing political, economical and social power over the native population (Lithuania didn't experience a significant German influence). Therefore, Nazi policy can be seen (although there were obvious differences) as certain reference to the former history.

² International lawyers are divided on the issue if the annexation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania by the USSR, proclaimed 1940, was at any time legalised.

Conscious of that not always glorious past, in the following period Germany declared support for the independence of the three States as well as their integration in the Western structures as an expression of a certain moral obligation. The realisation of these objectives was, however, also in the interest of a unified Germany.

The development of the three states was perceived by German politicians as one of key factors determining the situation of the region. Political, economic and social instability could have had a negative spill-over effect in the form of floods of migrants, organised criminality and ecological disasters; special concerns aroused about the tensioned relations of the three states with Russia, e.g. on the status of Russian minorities in Latvia and Estonia. It was feared the strong neighbour would wage a military intervention on the pretext of minorities protection.³ A solution to these problems and a successful transformation in the Baltic states could in turn positively influence the situation of the Baltic regions of Russia and the overall Russian policy toward the region.

Germany as the major state of the region (with corresponding economic power, decentralised structure enabling activities of sub-regional actors and with an established network of NGOs) seemed predestined to take the role of a 'gravitational centre' for the small states in the East. The following analysis will try to give an answer to what extent this scenario could be realised.

INTEGRATION OF THE BALTIC SEA REGION INTO WESTERN STRUCTURES

Objectives of the policy of German federal government toward Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the 1990s can be summarised as follows:

- to secure on a long-term basis the independence and territorial integrity of the Baltic states
- to support the Baltic states in the transformation process
- to stabilise a co-operative and constructive Baltic-Russian relationship
- to strengthen stability and security as well as democratic and market-economic development in the entire Baltic region (Ischinger 2000: 100)

³ Russia declared itself 'responsible' for the fate of compatriots in the so called 'Near Abroad', i.e. on the territory of the former USSR (see doctrine of the Russian foreign policy from 1993). This approach was explained with the attempt to preserve political control over the area.

The German policy perceived the inclusion of the Baltic states into a 'co-operative security architecture' of the Baltic rim as essential. It avoided the bilateral approach and attempted to integrate its support for the three States into activities of multilateral integration and security institutions. They seemed suitable in this context because of their proven capability to stabilise the international environment.

As the structure of major importance in this context the German government considered the European Community/European Union because it stand not only for economic prosperity but also for democratic stability and peaceful relationship between states. Clear support for the (gradual) integration of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania can be already found in the declarations on bilateral relationships from 1993.

The German attitude was vital for the three countries, as Germany was not only an influential EU member, but also its major net payer. Berlin's enthusiasm toward the accession temporarily cooled off, however, after budgetary problems became evident in the late 1990s. It is mainly due to the Finnish initiative that Latvia and Lithuania could join the accession negotiations in early 2000 (Estonia had entered into the first group in 1998).

Nevertheless, Berlin actively took part in the pre-accession strategy of the Baltic states, which can be seen in the participation of the Federal and Länder governments in the PHARE Twinning programme of institutional partnership.⁴ And in the end, it was the German Chancellor Schröder at the Copenhagen summit in December 2002 whose attitude was decisive in the successful conclusion of the accession negotiations.

Regarding the security status of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the countries' main objective was to join NATO—primarily because it would secure them against the perceived threat from a militarily dominant Russia. In contrast to the EU enlargement, German diplomacy was very reserved because of the foreseen negative impact on the relationship with Russia (which, of course, resulted in irritation of the Baltic partners). The need of co-operation in the security field was, however, perceived quite well, according to Berlin's strategy of stabilising the environment by networks of multilateral activities. Berlin advocated the

⁴ The federal structure of Germany enabled the involvement of regional actors in the EU pre-accession strategy for the Baltic States.

extension of NATO co-operation policies on the one hand, and the development of the European security policy within the West European Union (WEU) and the EU, extended on the Central and Eastern European states, on the other.⁵

Only the pragmatic turn in Russian foreign policy under President Putin enabled the Western states to decide in favour of NATO enlargement in the three Baltic states. German diplomacy was rather reactive in this case although it unrestrictedly supported the US-led initiative. In this way, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania became Alliance members in April 2004.

Multilateral forums should also provide a framework for solving specific Baltic-Russian problems (as minority or border issues), which could deprive them of their 'explosiveness', which was particularly evident in the first half of the 1990s. The German government supported addressing specific Baltic-Russian issues mainly by pan-European institutions in which the Baltic States and Russia possessed equal status.⁶ It was not least German pressure which made Latvia and Estonia invite missions of the Council of Europe and OSCE in order to monitor the observing of rights of large Russian-speaking minorities.⁷

BALTIC SEA REGIONAL CO-OPERATION

From the German point of view, regional co-operation is a way to strengthen stability and development along the Baltic Sea coast by addressing 'soft security' issues and promoting co-operation in different fields. In Baltic regional institutions, EU member states, aspirants to the EU as well as the 'outs' (Russia, Belarus, but also Norway) come together, so that a sense of regional identity and regional approach to the problems can be preserved after the enlargement of the EU.

As an important task on which this co-operation should focus, the German government saw overcoming social and economic disparities between the Northern and the Western part of the region on the one hand and the Eastern

⁵ The first Western organisation which granted the Baltic states a partner status was, on the German initiative, the WEU.

⁶ In contrary to the EU which announced the accession of the Baltic states and offered Russia only a partner status.

⁷ This group of makes up approximately 40% of population in Latvia and 30% in Estonia.

on the other, and included aid for the new democracies in their transformation process and strengthening of the civil society (Heimsoeth 2002: 292).

The intergovernmental structure providing a framework for activities of different actors in the region is the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). The German-Danish initiative leading to its establishment in 1992 resulted among other matters in concerns for the stability of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which had regained their independence only few months earlier. The CBSS excluded from the very beginning 'hard security' issues from its agenda, focussing on humanitarian, economic, ecological and cultural problems—acting mainly as co-ordinator of the activities of non-state actors and a 'mouthpiece' of interests of the littoral states toward international organisations, especially the EU.⁸

Interestingly, Germany opposed a far-reaching institutionalisation of the CBSS with the argument that co-operation should be maintained flexible. It can be, however, explained with the fear of certain 'regionalisation' within the EU, which would favour the 'Nordic' integration model rather than the French-German federal conceptions. Berlin was also for a long time not very active in efforts for more participation of the EU Commission (as its formal member) in the Council's activities until it became one of the priorities of the German presidency in the CBSS 2000/2001.

Among the projects launched by the Council, infrastructure projects such as *Via Baltica* and *Baltic Electricity Ring* were of concrete importance for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as they would strengthen their links with the developed industrial states and help to overcome their partly peripheral position. Problems of the three republics with organised criminality are addressed by the activity of the Council's 'Task Force on Organised Crime'. The German-led initiative of Eurofaculty, supporting the education of EU law and economy specialisations at the Baltic universities, is also worth of mention.

The CBSS provides an 'umbrella' for transnational activities of different sub—and non-state actors. Some Bundesländer established a co-operation with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the area of their competencies (esp. economy, education and police). Northern regions in particular, facing a relative economic

⁸ An example is a plan of regional priorities and projects by the CBSS regarding the implementation of the Northern Dimension of the EU, presented to the EU Minister Conference in April 2001.

crisis, saw in the co-operation a chance to improve their competitive position both within Germany as well as in the region. It regards trade relations, but also projects in fields such as education or tourism.

The Baltic rim has been an area of a substantial activity of German non-state actors, such as municipalities, trade associations, universities and ‘classical’ NGOs⁹, esp. in the fields not covered sufficiently by the states’ policy (esp. ecology and culture). Governmental or international structures provide frameworks for their co-ordination and support, but most initiatives in the region come ‘from the bottom’. Projects implemented within Community Initiative INTERREG II and III can be given as an example until 2004 directed to ‘old’ EU member states, but often with the participation of partners from the associated EU members from Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁰

NGOs and other non-state organisation have succeeded in building up Baltic-wide networks in order to exchange information and resources as well as lobby for their interests at the regional and European level (Siefkes 2002: 20 n.). German diplomacy supports these ‘people-to-people’ activities as an element of the strengthening the stability and prosperous development of the region. During the German presidency of the CBSS, the first large forum of NGOs from the region was organised in Lübeck, Schleswig-Holstein. However, in some fields of co-operation German non-state actors lag behind the organisations from the Nordic states, which are very active also in the support for societies of the three Baltic countries.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the early 1990s, Germany has consequently supported the independence and Western integration of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Co-operation on different levels (states, subregions, NGOs) was developed; this approach resulted not as much from the feeling of a moral obligation from the past as from the perceived necessity to secure the stable development of the three Baltic states.

⁹ As ‘Classical’ NGOs I understand independent from the state sphere and pursuing ‘altruistic’ interests (see Erik Hundewadt, *The Role of Voluntary Associations (NGOs) in a Democratic Society*, in: Jürgen Schramm (ed.), *The Role of Non-Governmental Organisations in the New European Order*, Baden-Baden 1995. pp. 13-24).

¹⁰ E.g. the German-Swedish-Polish-Lettonian project *High Quality Tourism for development of ‘ecological’ tourism* (Scherrer 2002: 248).

The specific interests of each actor involved (as e.g. the competitive efforts of the Bundesländer) were certainly also of importance. Independent from the motives, the co-operation with a major Western state was of great importance for their transformation process of the Baltic states.

The German policy on the national level showed reservation toward bilateral actions and tried to act within the framework of multilateral structures. These activities should positively impact on the overall relationships on the Baltic rim. Regarding tensions in Baltic-Russian relations, this approach posed limits on German (especially military) co-operation with the Baltic states, but on the other hand it contributed to promotion of the Baltic-Russian dialogue. In general it can be said that not least thanks to this strategy, 'hard' (military etc.) security risks could be removed in the Baltic, and the actors in the region could focus on 'soft' risks (criminality, illegal migration, ecological problems) (Heimsoeth 2002: 283).

Deficits in the German policy cannot, however, be overlooked. In spite of declarations, the Baltic Sea region is for the federal government (but also for the industry) of second importance, even if the interest is decidedly greater than before 1991. German activities in the regional co-operation stay behind those of the Nordic states. Certainly, Germany fears a too active policy in the region because of its past and latent suspicions of its hegemonic ambitions. But it seems Germany as the largest state of the region could more actively promote the interests of the region on the EU level so that it would become an integral part of EU policy in comparison with the Mediterranean region (Walter 1998 : 53).¹¹ So far, as the Finnish initiative of the Northern Dimension shows, such attempts are undertaken primarily by the Nordic states.

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¹¹ Cf. article by Palmowski where the author argues such a policy has at least been already formulated, Tadeusz Palmowski, „Wymiar północny” Unii Europejskiej, *Stosunki międzynarodowe* nr 1-2 (t. 29) 2004: 25-41.

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