

COOPERATION OF THE BALTIC STATES WITH THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES: SECURITY ASPECTS

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Abstract

The Visegrad countries of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, being “the core states” of Central and Eastern Europe, are seen by the international community, including the Baltic states, as a group of states which have a similar level of development and the same foreign policy strategy. For all of the countries, the main foreign and security policy priority is membership in the European Union and NATO.

The main hypothesis of this paper is that a dominant factor in the security policy of the Central and Eastern European countries is integration with the European Union and NATO, and this factor to a great extent affects the development of relations between the Baltic and the Central European countries.

Cooperation between the Baltic states and the countries of Central Europe has developed quite slowly and unevenly since 1991. This has been the result of several factors: transitional difficulties, a lack of material and human resources, insufficient economic interest and differing geopolitical interests. There can be no talk of any deep integration between the Baltic states and Central Europe in the economic or political sphere. An important factor has been the fact that the dominant factor in Baltic and Central European foreign policy during this period has been integration with the European Union, NATO and other international political, economic and security structures. Therefore, those types of cooperation which promote integration with these structures have developed more successfully, while other initiatives, which have hampered integration or have been seen as an alternative to it, have foundered.

The most important element between 1991 and 1997 was the development of bilateral relations. At the same time, however, the development of multilateral contacts and sub-regional cooperation must also be noted.

As the economies of the Baltic states and the Central European countries improve, and foreign policy mechanisms and experience increase, mutual interest in deepening cooperation will also increase. The links between this cooperation and integration with the EU and NATO, however, will not disappear, perhaps, will even increase. The expansion of the European Union and NATO may bring fundamental changes to cooperation between the Baltic states and the Central European countries, although the specific changes are difficult to predict.

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Introduction

The Baltic states -- Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia -- are small states. As small political actors, they have limited possibilities to influence any international system. In post-Cold War Europe, a new security architecture is presently under construction, but the main elements of the international system have not yet consolidated. This situation provides small states with a new international environment that has both advantages and disadvantages. As Allen Sens has pointed out,¹ the main advantage is the absence of a direct military threat and, by extension, enhanced physical security for small states. The principle of application of force in the settlement of international conflicts is encountering growing opposition; numerous international organizations provide small states with multiple opportunities to defend their interests; growing regionalism in Europe is having a stabilizing effect on political, economic and democratic processes (which are of particular importance for the Baltic states as they continue the process of political and economic transition); and the presence of the United States in Europe facilitates the preservation of existing non-conflictual norms and the stability of all security institutions in Europe.

The disadvantages, however, include the fact that although systemic threats have been diminished, some small states, and the Baltic states in particular, feel themselves to be less secure than others. This is partly the result of the transitional process -- the need to build up state sovereignty, a democratic society and a market economy simultaneously -- but a turbulent and changing international environment also contributes to a feeling of insecurity. The Baltic states consider integration with NATO, the European Union and other Western security structures to be their main security and foreign policy option. The success of this option, however, will to a large extent depend on outside factors, including the international environment. It seems that the accession process to the EU and NATO will be very protracted. So far the accession strategy of the Baltic states largely has been dominated by a single goal -- to achieve the strict

security guarantees that could be provided, first and foremost, by NATO. Once the candidates for the first wave of NATO and EU enlargement are named, however, the situation will change, and the Baltic states will have to participate actively in different security arrangements and to diversify their foreign and security policies.

To a considerable extent, the feeling of insecurity in the Baltic states emerges from the geopolitical reality of being located next to a great power -- Russia. In Olav F. Knudsen's words, "insecurity is the essence of a small state's existence, and never more acutely than when it is located next to a great power."² Although the Baltic states are "no longer mentioned as eventual participants of the reconstituted union",³ they are perceived by Russian politicians as part of the post-Soviet economic and security space, one that is dominated by Russia's geopolitical interests. The influence of Russia in some very important sectors of the Baltic economy, including transportation, trade and food exports, as well as its role in unresolved border issues and the issue of ethnic Russians in the Baltic states, are all factors used to apply political pressure on the Baltic countries. The Baltic states have frontiers with Russia, and they are therefore troubled by the possible renaissance of imperialistic tendencies or domestic troubles in that country. This causes an asymmetry and a turbulence in Baltic-Russian relations that can be overcome only by means of integration with Western economic and security structures. However, the Baltic membership in NATO meets Russia's opposition. There is some kind of contradiction in the Baltic security situation: stable and orderly relations with Russia are a precondition for integration with the Western security structures; at the same time, Baltic-Russian relations will achieve some measure of stability and predictability only if the Baltic states will be out of the "grey zone" and integrated with the European and Transatlantic security structures.

The Baltic states cannot change their geostrategic situation or influence the international system in any significant way. However, there are several strategies at their disposal to overcome, or at least to lessen threats to their national security:

- Diversification of foreign policy relations;
- Participation in interdependent relations (i.e., regional and international arrangements and institutions);

- Formation of alliances with groups of states or a major power.

In this context the development of Baltic relations with the Visegrad countries⁴ and the mutual effects of their foreign policy strategies must be explored. Development of cooperation with Central European post-communist countries is by no means the leading, nevertheless, it is an important security policy direction of the Baltic states.

The Visegrad countries of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, being “the core states” of Central and Eastern Europe,⁵ are seen by the international community, including the Baltic states, as a group of states which have a similar level of development and the same foreign policy strategy. For all of the countries, the main foreign and security policy priority is membership in the European Union and NATO.

Occasionally doubts are expressed about Slovakia in this regard. In terms of economic development, it does not lag behind the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary. In terms of GDP growth in 1996, for example, Slovakia had one of the highest indicators among associate member countries of the European Union.⁶ Nevertheless, Slovakia apparently will not be among those countries which will be in the first wave of EU and NATO expansion. The foreign policy prestige of Slovakia is harmed primarily by domestic problems (the authoritarian tendencies of Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar and his conflict with President Michal Kovac⁷) as well as pronouncements by some politicians who disagree with Slovakia's pro-Western orientation, especially in terms of possible membership in NATO, and who want to see closer ties with Russia instead. Despite these differences, the fact that all four countries are active in regional integration and that they all have more or less the same relations with the Baltic states allows us to view all four of them as a single group.⁸

Clearly the Baltic states have much in common with these Central European countries: they are all establishing market economies and pursuing social and political reform in order to overcome the heritage of the socialist past. The difficulties which they must overcome, as well as the accomplishments which they have made, are quite similar. At the same time, however, there is much that separates them. Let us look at just a few issues. The Central European countries, unlike the Baltic states, were formally sovereign countries during the Cold War. They have not had to establish such institutions as a foreign ministry, an

army, etc., from scratch. The Baltic economies, moreover, were closely integrated with the Soviet economy, which means that the economic transformation that they had to undertake was considerably more serious than this of the Central Europeans. Taking into account the fact that the economic and political problems which the Baltic states have to face are much more difficult, the achievements of these three countries are remarkable even if one or more of them have proven unable to get on the bandwagon of the first wave of the EU and NATO enlargement.

There are also differences in terms of the geopolitical situation of the various countries and the understanding of security policy priorities that emerges. The absence of a boundary with Russia (except in the case of Poland and the Kaliningrad enclave) is a fact which has given the Central European countries certain advantages in the effort to join NATO.

Furthermore, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania also have differing political, economic and security interests, and their level of cooperation with the various Central European countries, as well as the directions which this cooperation takes, are different.

Still, the Baltic states have common policies, and there have been some efforts to establish joint cooperation with the Visegrad countries. These efforts have not been particularly successful, as we shall see in a moment, but they nevertheless suggest that the Baltic states are interested in cooperation with the Central European countries and in establishing coordinated policies in this area.

Since regaining independence, the Baltic states have been borne along by the overall wave of the EU and NATO integration that has swept across Central and Eastern Europe. Consistent orientation toward those institutions have influenced Baltic relations with the Visegrad countries in two different ways. On the one hand, the Baltic as well as the Central European countries share a common lack of resources which limits their abilities to establish proper political and economic cooperation. The main efforts have been concentrated on a westward orientation. On the other hand, integration with the Western security and economic structures provided a necessary framework for development of bilateral and multilateral relations of the Baltic and Central European countries. The main hypothesis of this paper is that a dominant factor in the security policy of the Central and Eastern European countries is integration with the European Union

and NATO, and this factor to a great extent affects the development of relations between the Baltic and the Central European countries.

Several problems are of particular concern: To what extent does development of mutual relations with the Visegrad countries serve the enhancement of Baltic security? How many different forms of cooperation are possible? What will be the effects of the upcoming enlargement of the European Union and NATO to include several Visegrad countries on the development of their relations with the Baltic states?

Baltic and Central European cooperation before 1991

Although the main purpose of this study is to examine the development of cooperation between the Baltic and Visegrad countries since 1991, it should be stressed that such cooperation began even before the Baltic states regained their independence. The Central European countries were seen by popular movements in the Baltic states as natural allies, and indeed they were given considerable moral support by opposition forces in Central Europe. It was no accident that in November 1989, when Vaclav Havel received Sweden's Olof Palme award (handed by the Swedish Foreign Minister Sten Anderson), he said:

“I thank you for coming to me. During these dramatic days, when our history is being decided, I could not have left my people even for one hour. We are *de facto*, if not *de iure*, an occupied country – like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.”⁹

When democratic governments came to power in Central Europe, the Baltic republics counted on their support in striving for recognition of their right to independent statehood. The Baltic states sought to achieve recognition of their independence from Central Europe, as well as the support of Central European countries in their efforts to participate in various international events. The Central Europeans responded by demonstrating various types of support for the independence efforts of the Baltic states. For example, there were several meetings of parliamentary representatives from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1990. On May 20 of that year, they gave unanimous support to the admittance of the three Baltic republics to the Paris session of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in November. The Central European leaders also were unified in denouncing the activities of the Soviet armed forces in Vilnius and Riga in January 1991. Meeting in Budapest on January 21, the foreign

ministers of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland decided not to push for the accelerated dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, as the Czechoslovakian Federal Assembly had suggested after the Soviet attack in Lithuania, but they did issue a statement saying that the use of force in the Baltic states “endangers stability in Central and Eastern Europe” and urging the Kremlin to negotiate with “legally elected” Baltic governments.¹⁰ Still, the Central European countries did not recognize the Baltic states as independent, choosing instead to pursue a dual-track policy -- careful establishment of relations with the republics while simultaneously seeking to maintain good relations with the Soviet “center”. This policy was promoted most ardently by Poland, but it was also implemented by Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The governments of the Central European countries were anxious not to upset relations with Moscow and to take account of the position of Western governments in this process. In September 1990, Hungarian Foreign Minister Geza Jeszensky gave an interview in which expressed both official sympathy for Lithuania’s struggle for independence and a recognition of the constraints under which the Hungarian government had to work. Jeszensky said that recognition of Lithuania must be harmonized with the steps that were being taken by the great powers and with the Soviet position. He hinted that unilateral recognition of Lithuanian independence might subject Hungary to a Soviet blockade and delay the departure of Soviet troops.¹¹ Similarly, on June 13, 1991, Latvia signed a friendship declaration with Poland that committed both sides to resume full diplomatic relations “at the appropriate time.”¹² A similar example was recently revealed by Vitautas Landsbergis in an interview with the Polish newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*. He said that in January 1991 he had sent a confidential letter to Polish President Lech Walesa with a request that Lithuania be allowed to participate in Visegrad group meetings as an observer, but no reply was received.¹³ It should be pointed out in this context that later the Baltic states were equally cautious about official recognition of the independence of Slovenia and Croatia. The Lithuanian parliament expressed its support in July 1991, but Estonia and Latvia refrained from doing so.

Despite all this, it is true that in some instances the Central European countries were ahead of the West in developing contacts with the Baltic states. A Polish chamber of commerce and industry was opened in Riga in July 1990, for example -- the first foreign representational office in Latvia. On August 2, 1991, an agreement on trade and economic contacts, as well as on cooperation in science and technology,

was signed between Latvia and Czechoslovakia. This was the first agreement of its kind that Latvia had signed since 1940. Prague signed similar agreements also with Lithuania and Estonia. Thanks to the dual-track policy, the restoration of Baltic independence did not catch the Central European states unprepared, and full diplomatic relations were set up fairly quickly.

The Baltic states and Central Europe - two strategies

If we understand Central Europe to be a geographic or cultural/historical unit, then of the three Baltic states, only Lithuania has unquestionable links with the region. Lithuania is the “gate” of the Baltic countries to Central Europe, because geographically and historically, it is quite closely bound to the region. Lithuania is on the border of two cultural and historical regions. The Lithuanian foreign minister, Algirdas Saudargas, has spoken of this border situation as the dividing line between Western Europe and Eastern Europe and between Central Europe and Scandinavia.¹⁴

Yet if we see the Central European countries as a political unit in terms of being the leaders of the post-community community of nations, not a geographic, cultural or historical group, then this positioning of the question is fully justified. Closer ties between the European Communities and the countries of COMECON began even before the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union collapsed. In 1988 and 1989, the EC signed trade and cooperation agreements with Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary, and in December 1991 all three countries signed association agreements with the European Union (so-called Europe Agreements) which were to take effect in February 1994. (After the Czech Republic and Slovakia split apart, new agreements were negotiated, in October 1993, to take effect in February 1995.) The Baltic states, meanwhile, signed their association agreements with the European Union only on June 12, 1995. The fact that the Central Europeans began their integration process, as well as their economic and political reforms, faster means that the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary are the safest bets for membership in the first round of EU expansion. The same countries are also short-listed for early membership in NATO. The developers of Baltic foreign policy were aware of the fact that participation in the EU and NATO are the surest guarantees of the independence of the three states, and in order to achieve this integration as quickly as possible, it became crucially important to overcome the fairly significant differences that existed

between the Baltic and the Central European countries in the early 1990s and to prove that the former group is similar to the latter in terms of political development, thus making them eligible for integration with the EU and NATO simultaneously with the Visegrad group.

In order to accomplish this, the Baltic states could access two strategies, which could conditionally be called strategies of pushing away and of drawing closer.

The goal of the “pushing away” strategy is to ascertain that the international community does not see the Baltic states as part of the Russian sphere of influence and recognizes that the Baltic states have fundamental differences from the other republics of the former Soviet Union, both because they enjoyed independence in the interwar period and were occupied only in 1940, and because in terms of culture, history and politics, they are distinctly European countries. It is important, by extension, to ascertain that the Baltic states are seen as politically included in the Visegrad countries, i.e., in that group of countries which is proceeding with reforms most diligently and which can hope for membership in the European Union and NATO in the first round.

This strategy has been utilized most actively and most successfully by Estonia, never more clearly than during the negotiations between Estonia and the EU on the country’s association agreement. Estonia demanded that the agreement include a clause specifying that it is to take effect without a transitional period. The Estonian foreign minister at that time, Juri Luik, said that the 10-year transitional periods specified in the association agreements of the Central European countries could be interpreted as meaning that those countries could not hope for EU membership sooner than in 10 years.¹⁵ In 1994, Estonia’s foreign policy leadership hoped that the country might be accepted into the EU before the end of this century. Estonia’s position was controversial in the European Commission, and when in February 1995 the EU agreed to eliminate any transitional period from its agreement with Estonia, Tallinn justifiably celebrated a diplomatic triumph. Luik said that this allowed Estonia to participate in the pre-accession structural dialogue on equal terms with the associate countries of Central Europe.¹⁶

The victory was only partial, however. Even though the Latvian and Lithuanian association agreements specify a transitional period through December 31, 1999, and the Estonian agreement does not, the fact is that in some areas, including the free movement of labor, transport legislation, et al, a transitional

period is in effect for Estonia, too.¹⁷ Also, Estonia did not really obtain any distinct advantages over Latvia and Lithuania, because the association agreements with the three countries were signed on the same day, and all three states are participating in the structured dialogue with the EU on equal terms. The accomplishment did, however, allow Estonia to present itself as a leader in the region and to ensure that its economic and political development are often rated more highly than is the case with the other two Baltic countries; indeed, Estonia often is listed among the Visegrad countries in various rankings.¹⁸ This undoubtedly is the result of various economic successes in Estonia. In terms of GDP growth, for example, in 1996 Estonia lagged only behind Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Tallinn has also implemented consistent economic reforms, including rapid privatization and liberal policies in trade and customs affairs, and this, too, has helped to foster a positive image of Estonia abroad. At the same time, however, the differences among the Baltic countries are no so great as to suggest an indisputable priority for Estonia over Latvia and Lithuania.

The other Baltic countries have also devoted considerable effort to minimizing differences between themselves and the Visegrad countries. This has been done individually by the Baltic states, as well as collectively in various foreign policy efforts. These activities became considerably more intensive in 1994 when the Europe Agreements were being prepared and when discussions began on the expansion of the NATO alliance.

The greatest significance in this respect can be attributed to the negotiation of the association agreements with the European Union. Because EU expansion primarily involves criteria of economic development, the Baltic states are seeking to ascertain that the group principle, which favors the automatic admission of the Visegrad group in the first round of expansion, is not written in stone. This could have a deleterious effect if the principle were also applied to the Baltic states. Estonian Foreign Minister Toomas Hendrik Ilves said at the Swedish Foreign Policy Institute in January 1997 that the Baltic states must be seen as individual countries, not as a single block. He added that if Estonia is not admitted to the EU in the first round of expansion, that will suggest that Western Europe is ignoring economic successes in favor of geographic considerations.¹⁹ This pronouncement coincided with a statement by the German foreign minister, Klaus Kinkel, that Estonia is a special case in terms of NATO expansion, and with an

announcement by the Lithuanian foreign minister, Saudargas, that at least one Baltic state must be admitted to NATO in the first round of expansion so as to guarantee that the enlargement will continue beyond the first round. Even though Baltic politicians have denied that cooperation among the three states is on the wane, Estonia's conviction that it belongs among the first group of new EU member countries, as well as Lithuania's efforts to win NATO membership simultaneously with Poland, indicate that there are certain contradictions between the desirability of Baltic cooperation (both from the perspective of the three countries themselves and from the perspective of the European Union, NATO and other international economic and security structures) and the fear of at least some Baltic politicians that cooperation might be something of a geopolitical trap that could leave the Baltic countries in a security "gray zone".

Efforts of the Baltic states to ensure that they are included with the Visegrad group in discussions about EU expansion and that they are rated on specific, objective criteria, have been successful to a certain extent, insofar as the Baltic states themselves have been able to reach a level of economic and political development, and of cooperation with the EU under the auspices of the structured dialogue, which creates a believable foundation for these efforts. The ability of the Baltic states to influence the international environment in their own favor is otherwise sharply restricted.

This speaks to the limitations of the "pushing away" strategy, first and foremost because of geopolitical factors. The Baltic states are small and, for the time being, weak countries which can reach their foreign policy goals unaided only in those cases where the goals are dependent on the domestic and foreign policies of the Baltic countries and nothing more. Because the main pre-requisite (although not the only one) for EU membership is successful economic and political reform, and because objective criteria have been elaborated for the assessment of this reform, the Baltic states have been able to entertain certain hopes that they will be included in one group with the Visegrad countries in terms of EU membership discussions. When it comes to NATO, however other geopolitical and military criteria are more important, and here the Baltic states have had much smaller opportunities to influence events in their own favor.

The "pushing away" strategy essentially does not speak to expanded relations between the Baltic states and Central Europe. The "drawing closer" strategy, however, promotes the facilitation of bilateral and multilateral relations, as well as efforts to achieve closer political and economic integration with the

Visegrad countries. The overall goal of the strategy is the same as is the case with the “pushing away” strategy – to achieve integration with European and Transatlantic structures.

Bilateral relations

An intensification of bilateral relations is an indispensable element in the strategy of diversifying foreign policy relations as a whole.

Unquestionably the most active contacts have emerged between the Baltic states and Poland. That country plays a special role not only in the relations of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia with Central Europe, but also in other areas, as well. Poland is one of the Baltic Sea countries, and it is the one country in Central Europe with which the Baltic states have always had the closest economic and historical links. Poland is also a member, with the Baltic states, in the Council of Baltic Sea States. Furthermore, as the Central European country with borders with Lithuania, Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, Poland has been forced to formulate its “Eastern policies” much more clearly than have the other Central European nations.²⁰

Relations between Lithuania and Poland were rather complex in the early 1990s. Diplomatic relations were established in September 1991, but the relationship remained fairly tense for some time. This was because of disputes over the situation of the Polish minority in Lithuania, as well as a differing interpretation of history (primarily in terms of Lithuania’s demand that Poland recognize that the occupation of the Vilnius region in the interwar period was illegitimate). Compromise on these issues was reached in January 1992, and a declaration on friendship and good neighborly relations was signed. In September 1992, Lithuanian Prime Minister Aleksandras Abisala visited Poland, and the relationship between the two countries improved as a result of the trip. Constant progress has been made since then. The next Lithuanian government leader, Bronislovas Lubys, announced in Parliament in December 1992 that several aspects of the bilateral relationship should be reviewed with a fresh eye and that politics should be separated from history.²¹ This position facilitated the elaboration of a friendship and cooperation agreement, which was completed in February 1994. The agreement was signed during a visit by Polish President Lech Walesa to Vilnius in April 1994. The issue of the Polish minority, as well as painful passages from the history of the two countries, can still complicate the relationship between Vilnius and

Warsaw, but they have not had any seminal influence on the broader development of foreign policy directions.

Poland and Lithuania have common foreign policy and security interests, and this has served to promote ongoing improvements in the relationship between the two countries, despite changes in governments and political directions. Poland is interested in having a stable and democratic neighbor, and the two countries have significant economic ties. Another common issue is the fate of the Kaliningrad enclave, the militarization of which has a direct effect on the security of Poland and Lithuania alike. In September 1995, the foreign ministers of Poland and Lithuania, Jozef Oleksy and Adolfas Slezevicius, released a statement calling for the demilitarization of the Kaliningrad region.²²

The two countries have fairly extensive military cooperation. Poland has provided supplies to the Lithuanian armed forces, and Lithuanian officers are trained at the Polish Military Academy. Poland has also assisted in training Lithuania's peacekeeping forces. In December 1996, the Polish and Lithuanian defense ministers, Stanislaw Dobrzanski and Linas Linkevicius, said that the main emphasis in military cooperation at this time are the establishment of a Lithuanian-Polish peacekeeping battalion, which must be done by the end of 1997 under the auspices of the Partnership for Peace program, as well as the establishment of an air control system. The ministers signed an agreement which provided for the transfer of nine radar stations from Poland to Lithuania, as well as for additional technical assistance. Also in 1995 and 1996, Poland provided Lithuania with five Mi-2 helicopters, as well as other equipment and materials.²³

Another indication that Poland is gaining weight in Lithuanian foreign policy was provided by the fact that the first foreign trip of the new Lithuanian foreign minister, Saudargas, was to Poland (in January 1997). The Polish foreign minister, Dariusz Rosatti, expressed support for Lithuania's inclusion in the first round of EU and NATO expansion. The two men also discussed the possibility of Lithuania and Poland integrating into European and Transatlantic structures together, and of developing the relationship between the two countries at a new level.²⁴ Saudargas later explained that this might mean the creation of an institution similar to the Baltic Assembly.²⁵ In fact, Polish-Lithuanian cooperation is being institutionalized through the establishment, in July 1997, of an interparliamentary assembly. Efforts to promote a special

relationship between Lithuania and Poland have been of concern in Latvia and Estonia, where officials fear that this may occur at the expense of Baltic cooperation. The fact that several Lithuanian politicians have spoken publicly of the idea that Baltic cooperation does not hold much promise gives grounding for such fears. Unquestionably, however, development of mutual cooperation between Poland and Lithuania serves the interests of regional stability and, by extension, all of the Baltic states. Of course, there is reason to question the extent to which Poland will be able to be a "locomotive" in bringing Lithuania into the EU and NATO, especially given that Poland itself is not a member of the two organizations. Moreover, it is by no means clear that Lithuania's interest in deeper cooperation with Central European countries, especially Poland, suggests that such cooperation is seen as an alternative to Baltic cooperation.

Another very important element in future cooperation between Poland and Lithuania may be the establishment of a Neman Euroregion. The Madrid Convention of the Council of Europe on Euroregions provides that Euroregions are supposed to promote cooperation among local governments in frontier regions, facilitating economic cooperation and contacts among residents. The decision to support the establishment of a Euroregion along the Neman was taken on 23 June 1996 by an international commission that was established under the auspices of a 1995 agreement on cross-border cooperation. The Neman Euroregion would include part of the Suwalki district in Poland, the Marijampole and Alytus districts in Lithuania, as well as a few frontier regions of Belarus and part of the Kaliningrad enclave. This framework can help to stabilise Kaliningrad region.

Latvia's and Estonia's relationship with Poland has developed in a fairly stable manner since the restoration of independence. Poland is the most significant foreign trade partner for both countries among the Central European states. Poland is also very important to the Baltic countries as a transit corridor, because it provides the shortest land route to connect the Baltic states with most of the rest of Europe. For that reason, the cooperation with Poland, especially in terms of the *Via Baltica* project, is very important for the Baltic countries. Latvia and Lithuania have involved in improving the operation of border control facilities between Lithuania and Poland. Strictly speaking, of course, that is a matter for those two countries alone, but the fact is that improving the speed at which the frontier can be crossed and customs and border procedures can be conducted is very important for the economies of all three Baltic countries, as well as

Finland.²⁶ Problems on the Lithuanian-Polish frontier, as well as other border crossing points in the Baltic states, have been one of the main obstacles in implementing the *Via Baltica* project. All four countries need to elaborate unified border and customs control procedures.²⁷ As a basis for this, they are studying the border crossing and customs control procedures that are used between the EFTA and EU countries.²⁸

A visit by Polish President Lech Walesa to Latvia and Estonia in May 1994 underscored the good relationship between these countries and Poland. A friendship declaration was signed between Poland and Latvia, providing for cooperation between the two countries in the Partnership for Peace program and stating that both countries see the program as a route by which to get into NATO itself. A second declaration, affirming the principles of bilateral agreements signed between Latvia and Poland in 1922 and 1938, was also adopted. In this way, the two countries confirmed the historical continuity of their relations. In addition, Poland was the first country with which Latvia signed a military cooperation agreement.²⁹ In 1996 there was an exchange of visits by parliamentary speakers and deputies. Also that year, Polish Defense Minister Stanislaw Dobrzanski paid a visit to Riga. In June 1996, the ministers of foreign affairs signed a protocol on cooperation between the two foreign ministries.

A free trade agreement between Latvia and Poland, however, is still on the drawing board. Given that the level of trade between the two countries is quite significant, this is understandable, and there are many issues that must be addressed. The only outstanding problem in Latvian-Polish relations is the matter of awarding citizenship to persons of Polish heritage in Latvia. Cooperation in security issues is developing actively, both in bilateral terms and within the Partnership for Peace program.

At the same time, however, the level of Polish investment and foreign trade in Latvia and Estonia remains low. In 1996, Poland accounted for 1.4 percent of Latvian exports and 2.6 percent of imports.³⁰ Estonia's trade turnover with Poland is even smaller, although the level of trade is showing a growth tendency.

The Czech Republic has been fairly active in establishing relations with the Baltic countries. The greatest interest in cooperation, especially in economic terms, has been demonstrated by Lithuania, but Latvian and Estonian cooperation with Prague is also quite active, albeit by no means at full potential.³¹ Cooperation between the Czech Republic and the Baltic states is interesting in the sense that considerable

emphasis is put on military cooperation. During a visit to Latvia by the Czech defense minister, Vilem Holan, in January 1995, the Latvian armed forces received, at no charge, weapons at a value of two million Czech crowns.³² The Czech Republic is interested in developing an arms market in the Baltic states. It has also offered an opportunity for Baltic military officers to study at Czech training facilities. A very important element in cooperation, which could expand beyond the bilateral relationship, is mutual work in air traffic control. Generally speaking, Latvia's relationship with the Czech Republic was boosted considerably by the visit of President Vaclav Havel to Riga in April 1996. A free trade accord between the two countries was signed at that time.

The intensity of contacts with Slovakia and especially with Hungary increased in 1996 and 1997. In previous years, the diplomatic relationship of the Baltic states with Hungary had been less active than was the case with Poland and the Czech Republic. This is because the Baltic states have no history of political relations with Budapest; before World War II there was not much in the way of relations at all, and this means that there is no historical pattern, as is the case with Poland. The economic interests of the Baltic states, furthermore, are not as pronounced in Hungary as they are in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. There is hope, however, that both sides will demonstrate more active interest in the future, again on the background of European integration.

A visit by Hungarian President Arpad Goncz to Latvia and Lithuania in March 1997 was significant because of the fact that economic ties were emphasized. The unique relationship, however, exists between Hungary and Estonia, because both nations have Finno-Ugric ethnic roots. In 1994 the two countries signed a friendship and cooperation agreement which speaks to cooperation in security issues, in international organizations, between legislative and executive institutions (specifically including local governments), in economic, customs and cultural affairs, etc. Separate cooperation agreements were signed between the ministries of culture of the two countries. In September 1994 the presidents of the Hungarian and Estonian academies of science released a joint statement on the need to conduct research of the Finno-Ugric ethnos. The same issue was emphasized in a speech which Estonian President Lennart Meri made in honor of Goncz on 2 May 1996. Meri said that both countries must provide assistance to the smaller branches of the Finno-Ugric peoples, which are in danger of extinction, and the two countries must

cooperate in researching the culture and history of their ethnic forebears.³³ Of greater importance in determining the agenda for talks between the two countries, however, was integration in the European Union, as well as expansion of economic ties.

In 1995, and especially in 1996, to sum up, there were significant developments in the various bilateral relationships between the Visegrad and the Baltic countries. This occurred as the result of efforts on both sides, and to a very great extent the relations were facilitated by the process of integration with the European Union (the signing of free trade agreements), as well as integration with Western security structures (defense cooperation in most instances has been enhanced by participation in the Partnership for Peace program and the Bosnian peacekeeping mission).

There are several factors which work in favor of the development of inter-state contacts, among them a sense of solidarity among countries which have a common history under communist regimes, as well as security concerns which are common for countries which are small or medium-sized, but weak. The common goals of integration with the European Union and NATO also promote a broadening of cooperation. These same factors, however, can also work against the deepening of inter-state relations. A lack of resources and a competition for investments, as well as the attention of the major powers of the world, can weaken any sense of solidarity. In this sense the pressure which the European Union applies in Central and Eastern Europe in insisting that bilateral relations are a necessary precondition for integration with the EU is a beneficial thing. The same holds true in the defense sector. Those countries which have expressed a wish to become NATO members in the future are forced to expand mutual cooperation in security matters. The Baltic states, of course, realize perfectly well that cooperation with Central European countries alone cannot solve the basic security problems of the Baltic states, even if it does contribute to the overall stability of Europe.

One of the most serious obstacles in the development of relations between the Baltic and the Central European countries is an insufficiency of economic interest. This is a problem which also exists among the Visegrad countries themselves. In September 1995, the leaders of the CEFTA countries met at Brno. Polish Prime Minister Jozef Oleksy pointed out that Poland's trade with CEFTA partner countries represents a mere five percent of Poland's overall trade turnover.³⁴ It is true, however, that trade relations

among the Visegrad countries are increasing, and this can be seen as a tribute to the CEFTA agreement itself. When the Baltic states were part of the Soviet Union, the share of their trade which went outside the USSR was negligible (which was the case in the entire Soviet Union). In 1988, trade outside the Soviet Union represented 7-8 percent of the gross national product of the Baltic republics, while overall trade was equivalent to between 55 and 59 percent of GNP.³⁵

Despite the fact that economic contacts from the days of COMECON have survived, the proportion of Central European trade in the overall foreign trade structure of the Baltic states remains quite low. In Latvia's case (see Table 1), the Central European countries lag behind Russia, Germany, Great Britain and the Nordic Countries. Estonia has an even lower level of trade with Central Europe. The exception here is Lithuania, for whom Poland is an important trading partner. In 1995, Poland accounted for 5 percent of Lithuanian exports and 4 percent of imports. It should be pointed out that after some recession in 1991–1992, the Baltic trade with the Central European countries is increasing.

In 1992, one Lithuanian author predicted³⁶ that because products produced in the Baltic states and the Central European countries could not compete in Western markets, expansion of trade contacts among those countries would be beneficial. In the event, it has not worked out that way. Both in the Central European countries and in the Baltic states (as well as in the European section of the CIS, including Russia), the primary target for foreign trade relations is the European Union. It has turned out that there can be no such thing as "second-class" trade; only those products which meet European standards are appropriate for foreign trade, because even in Central Europe, Baltic products must compete with Western output. The same holds true with respect to Central European trade with the Baltic states.

This means that the Baltic and the Central European countries have all found themselves in the same situation: their efforts to integrate with the global economic system and the various forms of economic cooperation that exist in Europe mean first and foremost that the post-communist countries (at least those which are consistently trying to create market economies) are forced to orient themselves toward the economically developed countries and the economic standards of the European Union.

Geographic considerations specify that in terms of transit, the Baltic states have the greatest interest in Poland which, in a direct sense, is a land "gate" to Germany and most of Europe. If some authors

still feel that Central Europe provides this "gate to Europe" for the Baltic states,³⁷ we can speak of the region as a "gate" only in this specific sense. In all other respects, direct contacts with Western Europe prevail. It is also by no means clear that the Central European countries could serve as a "gate", even if they were interested in doing so. The Baltic states, as well as the Central European countries are seeking to improve economic relations first and foremost with the European Union . It may seem a paradox, but the best opportunities for economic cooperation between the Baltic and the Central European countries are created not by domestic factors, but rather by an external consideration -- the need to merge with the European Union. In fact economic cooperation has developed most successfully in those areas which are linked to integration with EU, and it is for this reason that cooperation between the Baltic states and CEFTA is not without promise.

Table 1

Latvian Exports and Imports to and from the Central European Countries, 1995-1996

	E x p o r t s				I m p o r t s			
	1995		1996		1995		1996	
	,000 lats	percent	,000 lats	percent	,000 lats	percent	,000 lats	percent
Total	688,413	100	795,172	100	959,636	100	1,278,169	100
Czech Republic	3,576	0.5	3,817	0.5	7,618	0.8	11,368	0.9
Hungary	1,324	0.2	1,639	0.2	4,398	0.5	7,935	0.6
Poland	17,191	2.5	10,962	1.4	18,234	1.9	32,772	2.6
Slovakia	1,277	0.2	1,847	0.2	3,403	0.4	4,552	0.4
Slovenia	324	0.0	452	0.1	1,272	0.1	2,074	0.2

Source: *Monthly Bulletin of Latvian Statistics*, No. 1 (32), February 1997, p. 109.

An additional factor here is that there was nothing in the way of significant political and economic cooperation between the Baltic and Central European countries between the two world wars, with the sole exception of Poland, which played a considerable, albeit controversial role in Baltic policies at that time.

On the whole, it can be concluded that bilateral relations with the Visegrad countries have developed most successfully in those areas and with those countries where there is a common historical background, established economic ties, or coinciding security interests.

A wider European framework fills, to a very great extent, gaps which exist in the bilateral relations of the Visegrad and Baltic countries. As Dr. Peter Talas pointed out in an interview with the author: "Hungary's political interest in the Baltics will be defined primarily (...) by the EC interest in the Baltic states."³⁸

Common Baltic policies

A certain shift in Baltic-Central European relations occurred in 1994, and efforts began to establish coordinated policies between the Baltic countries and the Visegrad countries as two regional groups. In Palanga on 25 March 1994, the presidents of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia announced that greater attention must be devoted to contacts in the political, economic and security sectors among the Baltic and Visegrad countries in order to facilitate the integration of the two groups in Europe's economic and security structures. An important step in this direction, said the presidents, was the signing of a free trade agreement between the Baltic and Visegrad countries.³⁹ On 15 May 1994, the fourth session of the Baltic Assembly published a statement on relations with the Visegrad countries, calling on the Baltic states to develop closer ties to the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.⁴⁰ There were also attempts to expand the cooperation even further, to include the Nordic countries. On 23 April 1994, at Tallinn, there was a meeting of parliamentary deputies from the Nordic countries, the Baltic states and the Visegrad countries. The deputies discussed the development of cooperation among the foreign affairs commissions of the various parliaments. At the end of 1994, Lithuanian President Algirdas Brazauskas, meeting with Czech President Vaclav Havel, called for the summoning of a meeting of heads of state from Eastern and Central Europe, including the Baltic states.

These Baltic activities unquestionably reflected a growing understanding that cooperation with Central Europe is important, especially in the context of EU and NATO expansion. The idea that coordinated integration policies are necessary was logical and fully justified, and to a great extent it

illustrated that greater coordination had been achieved in relations among the Baltic states themselves. Still, the Baltic initiative came too late. Political cooperation among the Visegrad countries began to deteriorate in January 1994. The Czech Republic in particular did not want to recognize the Visegrad group as a political organization, and Prague placed most of its accents on bilateral cooperation, as well as multilateral cooperation in broader institutional contexts (the EU associate countries, associate members of the Western European Union, etc.).

The overarching theme of all of these efforts, of course, has explicitly been integration with the EU and NATO. Still, the movement has largely been confined to the presidential and ministerial level of the various countries, although the various foreign ministries do consult with each other on the various issues of European integration. Efforts to create common Baltic policies have been undermined by the deterioration of the Visegrad group, but it is also true that the Baltic effort has never been particularly consistent.

As regards EU integration, there has been no structured dialogue with the Visegrad countries, and contacts have mostly been limited to bilateral relations, as well as contacts within broader frameworks. There have been some proposals for structured dialogue, including a proposal by Latvian Parliament Speaker Ilga Kreituse at a summit of parliamentary speakers from Central and Eastern European countries in December 1995 in Warsaw. Mrs. Kreituse suggested that a consultative forum be set up for EU associated countries, but the proposal did not meet with a favorable response.

Regional cooperation

There are no security structures involving all of Central and Eastern Europe except the OSCE, but it would be an exaggeration to say that a security vacuum exists. There are such programs as Partnership for Peace, as well as cooperation programs with other security institutions and defense cooperation at the bilateral level. Cooperation among the Baltic states, nevertheless, is the only more or less institutionalized regional security arrangement in Central and Eastern Europe.

It is also true that various forms of political, economic and cultural cooperation at the regional level provide a greater level of stability in Central and Eastern Europe and, to some extent, serve to

enhance security. There are different forms of regional cooperation in which Central and Eastern European countries participate: cooperation among the Baltic states, the Council of Baltic Sea States, the Central European Initiative, the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), various Euroregions, etc. Regional cooperation among Central European countries prior to World War II was insignificant, and after the war cooperative efforts were largely orchestrated by Moscow. This means that virtually all forms of cooperation must be built from scratch. Again, the exception here is the Baltic states, which during the Soviet occupation acquired an extensive sense of regional identity.

Still, the most ambitious enterprise in this area has been the Visegrad group. The creation of the group was, to a very large extent, the result of pressure from the European Communities. At the time when the Europe Agreements were elaborated, the EC felt that it would prefer a political dialogue with all three countries together. This attitude emerged not only from a wish to stimulate regional cooperation, but also from the fact that the agreements had to be elaborated in a very brief period of time. The Visegrad group was established on 21 February 1991, and this enhanced political dialogue significantly. From the very beginning, however, the attitudes of the Visegrad group member countries were not identical. The Polish view of the group's aims was described in this way by a scholarly author:

"As for the Poles, the 'Triangle' was from the beginning an attempt to create a network of economic and political (including security matters) ties on the pattern of loose integration (free trade area with a perspective of a customs union), our partners in the Triangle saw in it almost exclusively a factor which could speed up their entry into the Common Market. Recently, even this aim has seemed to evaporate, at least in the case of Prague. There was also an idea to join the EFTA as a 'midwife' who would deliver us to the European community; but the EFTA countries were faster than we expected, and this road now seems out of use."⁴¹

Ideas have also been expressed about expanding political and security cooperation among the post-communist Central and Eastern European countries in order to fill the "security vacuum" in the region. An example of this was the idea expressed by Polish President Walesa in March 1992 that a "NATO-2" should be created to include the Baltic and Visegrad countries, Belarus, Ukraine and, possibly, Russia. This would be a regional military and political union. Walesa envisioned this as a type of transitional structure for countries waiting for admission to NATO. Walesa spoke out in favor of the idea on more than one

occasion, but Poland did virtually nothing to move it forward. The idea did not receive support in the Polish political establishment and was, in fact, contradictory in a sense to Poland's often-stated conviction that only NATO can offer true security guarantees to the country.

Another event at which trial balloons on regional military cooperation were floated was a conference of defence ministers from the Baltic states, Moldova and Ukraine. Representatives from Poland, Romania and Belarus also attended the meeting, which took place in May 1993 in Riga. The meeting turned out to be nothing more than an exchange of views. The Latvian defense minister at that time, Talavs Jundzis, who hosted the meeting, said at the news conference upon the conclusion of the meeting that it would be useful to consider the establishment of regional Central European group within the NACC structure. Later he acknowledged that at one time, when NATO was not giving any answers about new member countries, there was a point to such proposals, then now their significance has been eliminated.

The most highly developed idea of this type was an initiative from the Ukrainian president, Leonid Kravchuk, on the creation of a security zone to include the Baltic states, Belarus, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania, the Visegrad countries, Austria, et al. The point of the initiative was to establish a unified European political and security space, a security system which would encompass all of Europe and include a Transatlantic link, as well, dealing with political, economic, military and other security-related cooperation.

None of these ideas has been developed further.⁴² In fact there has been a fairly wide spectrum of ideas, ranging from economic cooperation to outright defense alliances. With respect to those ideas which speak of broad regional alliances aimed at security cooperation, these are mostly linked to the larger issue of NATO enlargement, proposing structures which could serve as a substitute for NATO. An alliance of weak countries, however, could not provide clear-cut security guarantees and would most likely be nothing more than a kind of buffer zone between Western Europe and Russia, so these ideas have not received much support in the Central and Eastern European countries. Integration with NATO and the EU (with respect to common security and foreign policies) is a much more attractive security option for the majority of countries in Central and Eastern Europe than is any kind of alliance within the region alone, even if

integration to the West can be expected only in the distant future. It is felt that only integration in the Western security structures can resolve basic security problems.

To a considerable extent, ideas of broad political or military regional alliances have been underpinned by the concept of neutrality, i.e., the creation of some kind of a bloc of states between Russia and NATO. The concept of neutrality has become increasingly unpopular in the Baltic, as well as the Central European countries, and all ideas of this type have fizzled out. Not surprisingly, however, the ideas have remained popular in those countries where neutrality retains its popularity (e.g., Ukraine).

A meeting of the Baltic, Polish and Ukrainian presidents in Tallinn on 27 May 1997 revived talk of a Baltic-Black Sea union. The idea gained particular attention in the Russian mass media. There is no doubt that this meeting was a step forward in developing foreign policy coordination among these countries, but the necessary preconditions for the establishment of any kind of political or military alliance simply do not exist. Integration with the European Union and NATO is a more attractive security policy strategy for the Central European and Baltic countries, and economic links, too, are being developed first and foremost with the EU.

The most important factor that has dictated (and continues to dictate) that ideas on closer political, economic and military integration among the Central European and Baltic countries do not find much favor in these countries is a fear that such structures may become an excuse for the NATO and EU in delaying the expansion of those organizations.

Structures of economic regional cooperation have been more successful. In the early 1990s, the Central European countries viewed the inclusion of the Baltic states in sub-regional forms of cooperation quite positively. When Poland was admitted to the Central European Initiative (which at that time was known as the Hexagonal)⁴³ in 1991, the opportunity was created for the Baltic states to join the initiative in the future. The Central European Initiative is one of the oldest examples of regional cooperation in the region. Launched as a four-nation group (Austria, Italy, Hungary and the former Yugoslavia) in 1989 and expanded to include Czechoslovakia in May 1990, the group sought to promote the consolidation of democracy, economic recovery and development. Poland joined the group in July 1991. The original idea of economic cooperation was soon overshadowed by the disintegration of Yugoslavia and, to some extent,

by the breakup of Czechoslovakia. By the beginning of 1992, Yugoslavia's participation in the initiative had all but ended, and the new states of the former Yugoslav Federal Republic were all invited to join.⁴⁴ Presently the CEI works primarily as a mechanism for political consultation, although its two leading countries, Austria and Italy (both of which are EU member states) have remained strong promoters of pragmatic economic cooperation, acting with the financial support of the EBRD.

It should be noted that the Baltic states (except Lithuania) have not demonstrated any particular interest in participating in this form of sub-regional cooperation.⁴⁵

Perhaps the only form of regional cooperation in Central Europe that might be extended to the Baltic states is the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), which was established by the Czech and Slovak Republic, Hungary and Poland on 22 December 1992.⁴⁶ As Andras Inotai has pointed out, at first the agreement was not really a manifestation of the true desire of member states to promote regional cooperation; political and security considerations played a much more vital role.⁴⁷ One of the aims of CEFTA was to diminish the negative effects of the collapse of COMECON and to preserve at least partially those trade relations which had existed previously. Pressure from the EU, however, also played a significant role in the creation of the alliance.

The basic idea within CEFTA is to develop a free trade area by the year 2001 which would be based on strict mutual reciprocity and symmetry. Trade barriers on most raw materials and semi-processed goods were abolished in 1993, while trade in processed and manufactured goods is supposed to be liberalized within five years. With respect to "sensitive" products such as textiles, automobiles, iron and steel products, trade barriers are to be dismantled over an eight-year period. Special rules are applied to trade in agricultural products and processed foodstuffs.

CEFTA addresses not only trade, but also several other economic spheres, including the free movement of labor and capital, creation of conditions which stimulate direct links between enterprises and foreign investment, development of transport and infrastructure, coordination of national energy systems and telecommunications systems, etc. The actual impact of CEFTA on regional trade and its growth prospects, however, remains quite limited, because the level of intra-regional trade represents only a small portion of the overall trade of the countries that are involved in the pact.

CEFTA is one more area where closer cooperation could be developed between the Baltic and Visegrad countries, at least in the area of economic relations. In September 1995, the prime ministers of CEFTA countries met in Brno to sign an agreement that spoke to the admittance of new member states in the organization. Conditions for membership include having an association agreement with the European Union, free trade agreements with all CEFTA member countries, and membership in the World Trade Organization. Slovenia joined CEFTA in 1995. Lithuania has perceived this opportunity with enthusiasm, and hopes were once expressed that membership could be achieved in 18 months' time; this did not happen. Latvia and Estonia initially displayed a more reserved attitude.⁴⁸ Estonia was quite active in signing bilateral free trade agreements with Central European countries, but its attitude toward participation in CEFTA was not as enthusiastic.⁴⁹ At this point all three Baltic states have virtually equal prospects in terms of joining CEFTA, although there are differences in tactics. Lithuania is placing a greater emphasis on the conclusion of free trade agreements with the CEFTA member countries. Vilnius has already done so with every CEFTA country except Hungary. Latvia is devoting greater attention to the World Trade Organization. Membership in the WTO by the end of 1997 is a key priority of Latvian foreign policy, and it is possible that Latvia will be the first of the Baltic states to win admission.⁵⁰

It must be understood that the Baltic states view CEFTA membership first and foremost as an instrument that would facilitate their integration with the European Union. The establishment of a broad free trade zone, which would be expanded all the more by free trade agreements with Ukraine, would promote the establishment of a unified economic space in Central and Eastern Europe, which is important for the integration of this region with the European Union; naturally, it would also foster economic cooperation among the countries of the region.

Regional cooperation between the Baltic and the Visegrad countries is hampered by the same factors which are relevant in Central European cooperation. There are forces which strengthen regional cooperation among Central European countries, including regional proximity, historical background, internal and external economic motivations and political and security considerations. Regional cooperation signals to the outside world that the countries of the region are willing and able to establish common goals and to adopt internationally recognized rules of the game. There are, however, also powerful motivations

which work against cooperation. The main one is the fact that there is no unifying force within the region. Historical experience shows that cooperation in Central Europe has most often been induced from the outside. All of the countries of the region need to modernize their economies, but they need some "anchor of modernization" that would facilitate this process. Such an anchor is located outside the region, and because intra-regional trade is very modest, economic recovery cannot be started, and international rules of the game cannot be learned within the framework of regional cooperation, something that has frequently been pointed out by Western analysts.⁵¹ It should be pointed out that intra-regional economic relations are mostly influenced by rivalry, not cooperation. Another major obstacle is that the geographic location of the Visegrad countries implies that their security and political interests reveal only partial similarity. This applies to their strategies towards Germany and Russia, as well as towards the nationality issue.⁵²

"The Western approach that emphasizes the importance of regional cooperation as a precondition to getting integrated with the EC either fatally misunderstands the situation in Central (and Eastern) Europe or is based on a deliberate but never openly expressed protectionist strategy."⁵³

Intra-regional cooperation and trade can be expected to develop only to the extent to which these countries are able to and permitted to become involved in a global and basically EC-level division of labor. There is no way leading in the other direction, i.e., from regional to global integration. In other words, successful regional cooperation is not the condition for, but rather the consequence of successful integration into the international economy.⁵⁴ Also, Brussels could have strengthened regional cooperation significantly if the Visegrad countries had been given better access to EC-financed aid programs directed to the successor states of the Soviet Union (agricultural products, medicines, etc.). Quite the opposite happened: many EC aid packages served to crowd out Central European enterprises from their traditional markets in the ex-Soviet Union.⁵⁵

What Baltic cooperation and Central European cooperation have in common is the fact that in both instances security considerations initially played (and continue to play) a much more important role than economic considerations. In both cases, there are few internal stimuli for cooperation. Both groups of states need some force that can stimulate cooperation. Security concerns are an integrational force of the type which otherwise goes lacking in terms of regional cooperation. Security considerations also explain why

Baltic cooperation is moving ahead despite certain drawbacks and some stopping and starting in the process. The Baltic states feel more insecure than do their Central European neighbors, and their security concerns are very similar.

The main obstacle against the development of political, security and economic sub-regional cooperation is the fact that the Central and Eastern European countries are afraid that sub-regional organizations may become something of a trap -- an alternative to the European Union and NATO.

Research done by the East-West Research Institute bears this out:

"Would-be candidates of these organizations are afraid they could be shut out on the grounds that sub-regional arrangements would adequately cover their needs. They fear that all members of a sub-region might be considered for admission together, condemning the strongest to wait for the slowest. Some also consider that investing in these forums will redirect resources away from their key aim of gaining admission to NATO or the EU."⁵⁶

This means that any kind of sub-regional cooperation will have a future only if it promotes the involvement of member countries in the European Union, NATO and other Western European security and economic organization. This leads to the conclusion that integration with European and Transatlantic structures is a precondition for the development of sub-regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe. If integration were delayed or slowed down, this could be a hard blow against the further development of regional cooperation, but also against regional stability in the Baltic region, as well as Central Europe.

Baltic security and the first wave of EU and NATO enlargement

The upcoming decisions on enlargement of the EU and NATO will probably be rather disappointing for the Baltic states. They will certainly not be admitted to NATO. The situation is not as clear in terms of EU enlargement, as some possibility remains that at least one Baltic country (Estonia, probably) could be included in the first round of enlargement. Decisions taken at the Amsterdam summit from 16-18 June 1997, however, make even that quite improbable. The decisions also suggest that the first wave of enlargement will take a long period of time, and Baltic hopes for EU membership will have to be postponed to the more distant future.

The process of admitting some Visegrad countries to NATO and the EU will begin, however, and this will have implications for the Baltic states. The security environment in Central and Eastern Europe will be changed considerably, and it is safe to assume that the economic and political stability of the first new member states will increase. A consequence of this could be an increase in their ability to contribute more actively to cooperation with the Baltic states.

There are more pessimistic possibilities, too. It can be expected that newcomers to the EU and NATO will encounter difficulties in the integration process that will demand a considerable amount of time and resources. Newcomers may also find themselves more inclined to pursue closer relations with Brussels. Difficulties in the integration process could also exacerbate internal debates in the countries which are now under consideration.

There are fewer technical problems in the area of NATO enlargement, but difficulties which may emerge from the EU expansion could include application of EU norms on visa regimes and border-crossing procedures to Baltic states which border Central Europe.

It can be expected that bilateral relations with the Visegrad countries will remain the most significant aspect of cooperation. At the same time, however, it is likely that Baltic cooperation with the Central European countries will increase only if it is backed by simultaneous intensification of the relationship with the EU and NATO itself. Perhaps during the accession process some type of "special relationship" should be established between the countries of the first wave and the remaining aspirant countries in order to enhance links with the EU and NATO.

As regards sub-regional cooperation, the possible effects of EU and NATO enlargement may also be controversial in some aspects. Although incentives for more active sub-regional cooperation could be boosted, EU enlargement could have a negative effect on CEFTA cooperation if EU member countries had to withdraw from the arrangement. Then CEFTA cooperation would have to be modified in some way.ⁱ

Of special importance to the Baltic states will be changes in Poland's role in the region. Poland is the largest country in Central Europe and the only one which can pretend to the role of a regional power. It is likely that a growing regional role for Warsaw would most likely result in more active participation in the Council of Baltic Sea States and an increasing role in the Baltic Sea region in general. Poland also

could implement more active Eastern policies, and that might have a stabilizing effect on Ukraine and Belarus.

It will be important for the Baltic states to obtain the political support of the Central European countries which enter the EU and NATO in the matter of later Baltic membership in the two organizations. However, it should be taken into account that the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland have expressed more interest in integration of Romania and Slovenia with the EU and NATO in the first place. For example, Polish president Kwasniewski defined this as the main geopolitical interest of the Central European countries during his visit in Hungary on January 1997. Also Czech and Hungarian prime ministers Klaus and Horn in March 1997 championed Romania's and Slovakia's admittance to the first round of NATO enlargement.ⁱⁱ This means that the Baltic states have to undertake consistent diplomatic efforts to ensure that their aspirations do meet a constant support from the Central European countries. At the same time, the presence of NATO, and especially the EU in Central Europe will increase the volume of economic, political and military cooperation.

Possibilities of building a security region in Central Europe, one which includes the Baltic states, should also be considered. It seems that such a region is less feasible than a Nordic-Baltic region. In the latter case there is a core of stable and militarily well-established Scandinavian countries that are able to hold together such a region. Geographic and cultural proximity, as well as economic interests, must also be taken into consideration, and such advantages are not available when it comes to Central Europe. NATO and EU enlargement, however, may bring about some changes in this respect.

Conclusions

Summing up the aforesaid, we can conclude that cooperation between the Baltic states and the countries of Central Europe has developed quite slowly and unevenly since 1991. This has been the result of several factors: transitional difficulties, a lack of material and human resources, insufficient economic interest and differing geopolitical interests. The main factor, however, has been the fact that the dominant factor in Baltic and Central European foreign policy during this period has been integration with the European Union, NATO and other international political, economic and security structures. Therefore,

those types of cooperation which promote integration with these structures have developed more successfully, while other initiatives, which have hampered integration or have been seen as an alternative to it, have foundered.

Despite declarations from Baltic and Central European politicians about the desirability and necessity of cooperation, the developmental pace has been fairly slow, and there can be no talk of any deep integration between the Baltic states and Central Europe in the economic or political sphere. Even Lithuania, which has demonstrated much greater interest in cooperation with the Central European countries than have Estonia and Latvia has not been able to make any great progress. Obviously there are objective factors at play.

The dominant role of the European Union and NATO has also, since 1991, served to specify the development of bilateral, multilateral and sub-regional cooperation between the Baltic states and Central Europe. The most important element between 1991 and 1997 was the development of bilateral relations. At the same time, however, the development of multilateral contacts and sub-regional cooperation must also be noted.

As the economies of the Baltic states and the Central European countries improve, and foreign policy mechanisms and experience increase, mutual interest in deepening cooperation will also increase. The links between this cooperation and integration with the EU and NATO, however, will not disappear. Once the enlargement of these organizations begins, it is possible that the importance of the factor will even increase. The expansion of the European Union and NATO may bring fundamental changes to cooperation between the Baltic states and the Central European countries, although the specific changes are difficult to predict. It is possible that the inclusion of some countries from the region in the larger structures will facilitate their cooperation with the Baltic states. There is probably no reason to fear that the countries admitted to the EU and NATO in the first round will "forget" the less successful associated countries.

The support of Central European countries which become members of the EU and NATO will be important for the Baltic states in terms of the integration process. The presence of NATO, and especially the EU in Central Europe will increase the volume of economic, political and military cooperation. The expansion of NATO and the EU may also increase the role of Poland in the region, making Warsaw an

important link in the development of cooperation between the Baltic states and the Central European countries.

¹ Sens, A. "The Security of Small States in Post-Cold War Europe: A New Research Agenda". Working Paper No. 1. Institute of International Relations, University of British Columbia, January 1994, pp. 11-36.

² Knudsen, O. "Sharing Borders with a Great Power: An Examination of Small State Predicaments. NUPI Report 159. Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (1992), p. 6.

³ Stranga, A. "Baltic-Russian Relations: 1995 - Beginning of 1997", in Lejins, A. and Z. Ozolina (eds.). Small States in a Turbulent Environment: The Baltic Perspective. Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs (1997), p. 185.

⁴ I would like to stress that in this article, the term "Visegrad Group" is understood to mean the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia -- four Central European states in which the Baltic states have a fairly similar level of political and diplomatic contacts. The term "Central Europe", both in this article and elsewhere, is fairly open to interpretation. Different authors use such terms as "Central Europe", "Central and Eastern Europe" and "Eastern Europe". These terms, in turn, are sometimes used to refer to all post-communist countries in Europe except Russia, while at other times Russia is included, as well (especially in terms of "Eastern Europe"). On other occasions, the terms are applied narrowly -- to the Visegrad countries. The Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary have been called "East Central Europe". See, e.g., Hyde-Price, A. The International Politics of East Central Europe. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press (1996). Also Cottey, A. East-Central Europe after the Cold War : Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary in Search of Security. Houndmills, Basingstoke, et al.: Macmillan Press & St. Martin's Press (1995).

The term "Visegrad countries" is also somewhat misleading (it comes from an agreement that was signed on 15 February 1991 in the Hungarian city of Visegrad between Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary), because it creates the impression that we are speaking of a political union of four countries. In fact, we can speak of nothing more than economic cooperation among the four countries, and even that is more closely associated with the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) than the Visegrad concept. The Visegrad group survives as a mechanism for political consultations and economic cooperation among the Central European states, but it is in no way institutionalized. Still, the term "Visegrad countries" is used frequently, not least because unlike "Central Europe" and similar terms, it refers to a specific group of countries.

⁵ Weidenfeld, W. (ed.). A New Ostpolitik -- Strategies for a United Europe. Guetersloh: Bertelsman Foundation Publishers (1997), p. 2.

⁶ "Eksporta pieauguma tempu pazemināšanās uz laiku palēnina ekonomisko attīstību" (Lowered export growth rates temporarily slow economic development), *Eiropas Dialogs*, No. 1, Jan.-Feb. 1997, p. 27.

⁷ "Although it may sound paradoxical, the primary foreign policy problem of the Slovak Republic is its domestic situation". Butora, M. and P. Muncik (eds.). Global Report on Slovakia. Bratislava: Sandor Marai Foundation (1997), p. 319.

⁸ It should be noted that recently, especially since the signing of associate agreements with the European Union, a leading position in Central Europe has increasingly been taken by Slovenia. It, too, is developing closer relations with the Baltic states.

⁹ ELTA. *Information Bulletin*, No. 13 (373), December 1989.

¹⁰ ELTA. *Information Bulletin*, No. 2-II (30), February 1991.

¹¹ ELTA. *Information Bulletin*, No. 9 (384), September 1990.

¹² "Latvia hails Polish friendship pact as step to independence", *The Baltic Independent*, 20-26 June 1991.

¹³ *Rzeczpospolita*, 28 January 1997, reprinted in the Lithuanian newspaper *Teviskes Ziburiai*, 18 February 1997.

¹⁴ "Algirdas Saudargas w Osrodku Studiow Wschodnich" (Algirdas Saudargas at the Eastern Research Center), *Biuletyn Baltycki*, Eastern Research Center, Warsaw, No. 1(2), 196, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Eesti Ringvaade*, Vol. 4, No. 37-2 (15-18 September 1994).

¹⁶ *Eesti Ringvaade*, Vol. 5, No. 8 (19-25 February 1995).

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- ¹⁷ "Europe Agreement establishing an association between the European Communities and their Member States, of one part, and the Republic of Estonia, of the other part", Articles 41, 43, 50, et al.
- ¹⁸ Estonian Foreign Minister Toomas Hendrik Ilves admitted on March, 1997 that the European Commission has not developed a unified view on the possibility that Estonia might be admitted to the EU, and even though an official view has not yet been published, unofficial information suggests that the view of the commission on Estonia is good, but not sufficiently good to provide any specific guarantees with respect to membership. BNS news agency, 13 March 1997.
- ¹⁹ Baltic News Service (BNS), 12 January 1997.
- ²⁰ A former employee of the American Department of Defense, Sherman W. Garnett, has criticized Poland for a lack of a consistent *Ostpolitik*. There is some truth to this criticism, but at the same time it is clear that Poland has done more than any other Central European country in elaborating and implementing such a policy. See Garnett, S.W. "Poland: Bulwark or Bridge?", *Foreign Policy*, Spring 196, pp. 66-82.
- ²¹ *Monthly Newsletter From Lithuania*, No. 10 (December 1992).
- ²² BATUN, *Baltic Chronology*, September 1995.
- ²³ BNS, 4 December 1996.
- ²⁴ BNS, 7 January 1997.
- ²⁵ BNS, 10 January 1997.
- ²⁶ In December 1992 Finland submitted a formal protest to Lithuania for the enormous delays in traffic at the Lazdiji border control facility. *Monthly Newsletter from Lithuania*, No. 10 (December 1992).
- ²⁷ *Current Latvia*, No. 12/95 (20-27 March 1995).
- ²⁸ Frierson, B. "On the road to Via Baltica", *The Baltic Times*, 20-26 June 1996.
- ²⁹ Bleiere, D. "Multilateral and Bilateral Relations with Poland, Ukraine and Belarus", in Lejins, A. and D. Bleiere (ed.). *The Baltic States: Search for Security*. Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs (1996), p. 125.
- ³⁰ *Monthly Bulletin of Latvian Statistics*, No. 1 (32), February 1997, p. 109.
- ³¹ Interview with Hana Polivkova of the Czech Foreign Ministry on 27 October 1995. Polivkova said that until 1993 the Czech Republic tried to establish balanced relations with all three Baltic countries but found over time that the level of reciprocal interest in the three countries was not identical.
- ³² Bebriss, P. "Czech Defence Minister visits Latvia", *The Baltic Observer*, 26 January - 1 February 1995.
- ³³ *Eesti Ringvaade*, Vol. 6, No. 18 (28 April - 4 May 1996).
- ³⁴ Address by Mr. Jozef Oleksy, Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland, at the meeting of CEFTA Member States, Brno, the Czech Republic, 11th September, 1995. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, *Materials and Documents*, Vol. 4, No. 9 (1995), p. 883.
- ³⁵ Gros, D. and A. Steinherr. Winds of Change: Economic Transition in Central and Eastern Europe. London and New York: Longman (1995), p. 370.
- ³⁶ Grizas, R. "The economy of East European countries", *Baltic News*, No. 4-5, 1992, p. 20.
- ³⁷ See, e.g., Hyde-Price, A., *op. cit.* [Note 4], p. 141.
- ³⁸ Interview with dr. Peter Talas, Institute for Strategic and Defense Studies, Budapest, 12 October 1995.
- ³⁹ Statement of the Presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on the Extension of Mutual and Regional Cooperation, *Current Latvia*, No. 12, 21-28 March 1994.
- ⁴⁰ Statement on Relations with the Visegrad States. Fourth Session, Jurmala (Kemer), 13-15 May 1994. *Baltic Assembly session documents 1991-1994*, Riga, April 1995, p. 44.
- ⁴¹ Lamentowicz, W. and J. Stefanowicz. "Poland: Towards a Modern Concept of Sovereignty in an Integrated Europe", in Lippert, B. and H. Schneider (eds.). Monitoring Association and Beyond. The European Union and the Visegrad States. Bonn: Europa Union Verlag (1995), p. 116.
- ⁴² See Hyde-Price, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 238-240. Also Bleiere, D., *op. cit.*, [Note 29], pp. 114-140.
- ⁴³ Kun, J.C. "Hungarian Foreign Policy: The Experience of a New Democracy". *The Washington Papers*, No. 160. Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, published with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (1993), p. 97. At first the Central European Initiative was known as Adratic-Donau cooperation, then the Pentagonal and then the Hexagonal (by virtue of the number of participant countries), and only later the name which it bears at present.
- ⁴⁴ Reisch, A.A. "The Central European Initiative: To Be or Not to Be?" *RFE/RL Research Report*, Vol. 2, No. 34, 27 August 1993, p. 30.
- ⁴⁵ It is possible that one factor which has diminished interest in the CEI is the fact that the Baltic states have trouble in finding unified points of interest and contact with the participating countries of the

initiative. This identity problem was addressed in an interview on 18 July 1996 by an official of the Estonian Foreign Ministry, Kalev Stoicesku.

⁴⁶ When the agreement was signed it was already known that the Czech and Slovak republics would soon split into two countries.

⁴⁷ Inotai, A. "The Visegrad Four: More Competition than Regional Cooperation?", in Lippert and Schneider, *op. cit.* [Note 41], pp. 161-162.

⁴⁸ "Lithuania closer to CEFTA -- Latvia and Estonia say 'no'", *The Baltic Observer*, 21-27 September 1995.

⁴⁹ In the aforementioned interview, Kalev Stoicesku said that Tallinn's hesitation was due largely to the very low level of trade between Estonia and the CEFTA countries.

⁵⁰ At a conference of WTO member country ministers in December 1996, Latvia was listed among the 28 countries which might join the organization in 1997. BNS, 23 December 1996.

⁵¹ Inotai, A., *op. cit.* [Note 47], p. 167.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁵⁶ Bailes, A.J.K. "Sub-regional organizations: The Cinderellas of European security", *NATO Review*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (March 1997), pp. 27-31.

ⁱ At this moment pointed out authors of the recent study, devoted to the effects of the enlargement processes. See Wohlfeld, M. (Ed.), The effects of enlargement on bilateral relations in Central and Eastern Europe. Chaillot Paper 26, Paris: Institute for Security Studies Western European Union (June 1997).

ⁱⁱ BNS, 21 January 1997 and 18 March 1997.