

Baltic Voices: From the Fringes to the Fore

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Voices of small states often go unnoticed in times of trouble, when grand geopolitics prevails over diplomacy. When the temperature heats up, both observers and decision-makers tend to focus on power dynamics and the imperium of the strong. In the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have proven that their small size does not automatically equal irrelevance.

Over the last year, the Baltics have shown that a good combination of geopolitical understanding, clear and consistent objectives and a high degree of credibility can help overcome marginality. They have also helped to amplify their small voices to achieve unprecedented centrality and influence in terms of policy-shaping and decision-making.

Understanding Russia

Since February 2022, both in the context of NATO and the European Union, we have witnessed the progressive emergence of push and pull dynamics generally involving a reactive "Old Europe" and proactive Central and Eastern Europe. In the European context, this implies that the political energy and primary impetus that led to many key collective decisions have first emerged and taken shape in Riga, Tallinn, Vilnius or Warsaw, and then spilled over to Paris or Berlin, towards a broader western consensus. From a policy-making perspective, the Baltic states have moved from the margins to the centre of the debate and of the agenda-setting process. They have ultimately left a tangible and lasting impact both in terms of concrete policies and the periphery's power of agency.

While usually considered among the most reliable EU and NATO members, the Baltic states have traditionally had only limited luck in shaping these organisations' collective Russia policies, given the countries' uneasy relationship with Moscow shaped by painful historical path dependency. Traditionally, Russia has reinforced these dynamics by consistently depicting the Baltic states as immature and radical antagonists, thereby shifting the blame onto them for the icy relations between Moscow and the Baltic capitals. Since the mid-1990s, Russia's paternalistic approach and post-colonial diplomatic contempt have prevented both a change in these dynamics and a reduction of geopolitical tensions in the Baltic Sea region.



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Before February 2022, a number of Western European states were not completely immune from this narrative, sometimes portraying the Baltics as hawkish and overly obsessed about Russia. This convergence of misperceptions and misconceptions has often undermined the Baltics' capacity to successfully affect Brussels' Russia policy, and contributed to the gap between “old” and “new” Europe.

Moscow's full-scale invasion radically changed this state of affairs. The Baltics' painful historical relationship with Russia and their memory of occupations – along with first-hand experience of Moscow's interference and aggressive tactics – have increasingly emerged as a precious resource for NATO and the EU in understanding Putin's strategies and countering them effectively. Alongside the painful experience of Soviet occupation, the Baltics have been long-time targets for different aggressive hybrid strategies, cyber-attacks and massive disinformation campaigns initiated by the Kremlin. These are designed to undermine public trust in state institutions. In addition, Estonia and Latvia are home to large Russophone minorities that Russia has traditionally attempted to weaponise through the instrumentalisation of language and historical memory.

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Following the failure of all western attempts to “bring Russia back to reason”, exemplified by the countless trips to Moscow by western leaders before 24 February 2022, the Baltics propose a different experience-based approach towards the Kremlin – a radical alternative to appeasement. This approach is based on three postulates that have gained increasing traction both within NATO and the EU: 1)

Moscow's appetite can only grow; 2) Moscow sees every concession as a sign of weakness; and 3) Moscow understands only the language of power.

Consistent objectives

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, the objectives pursued by the Baltic states have been consistent with these assumptions. Instead of blaming Berlin and Paris for assigning them the uncomfortable role of ignored "Cassandras", there has been an emphasis on learning from past mistakes. Accordingly, the lessons learnt by the Baltics show us that no middle ground approaches are possible and only a defeat of Russia in Ukraine can stop Moscow's hegemonic aspirations in the region. The new geopolitical reality implies the necessity to strengthen a defensive security framework against Russia. Unlike many in Western Europe, who fear the unpredictability of a weak and wounded Russia, the Baltic leaders have no doubts that the only suitable exit strategy for this war is Moscow's defeat, followed by the development of credible security guarantees without (or against) Russia.

In the words of Estonia's Prime Minister Kaja Kallas: "It is important to not make that mistake again like we did in Crimea, Donbas, Georgia ... We have done the same mistake already three times saying that negotiations, negotiated peace is the goal ... The only thing that Putin hears from this is that '[He] can do this because no punishment will follow.'"

With this in mind, the Baltic states have stated since February 2022 that the goal of the western allies should be to support Ukraine until its final victory, implying a full Russian retreat, the prosecution of war crimes and reparations for Russian victims. This uncompromising position has gained ground both inside NATO and the EU as a direct result of the growing centrality of Baltic (and Central and Eastern European) voices. Given the clarity of these desired outcomes vis-à-vis the more nuanced positions of Western European partners, the Baltic position can be more easily translated into clear and quantifiable policy objectives.

When it comes to direct support to Kyiv, the Baltics' key objective is proactive, focusing on lasting and timely support for Ukraine both economically and in terms of materiel and weapon systems. It is worth noting that the Baltic states have been advocating for deliveries of western tanks and aircraft to Ukraine since the summer of 2022.

With regards to Europe's collective security and deterrence of Moscow's imperial appetites in the region, the Baltic states have been consistently advocating for a more incisive role for NATO, and growing interoperability with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy. All the Baltic governments also advocate for a more substantial and permanent presence in the region, both in terms of weapon systems and boots on the ground. In order to make NATO fit to respond to the challenge of Russia's aggression and expansionist appetites, the Baltics have stressed the need to make NATO's two per cent pledge a baseline, rather than a final target. The three countries have led by example and are committed to raise the bar. The new Estonian government has committed to increase, over the next years, defence and security spending to six per cent of GDP, consisting of three per cent to military defence and three per cent to non-military aspects – mostly relating to holistic societal resilience.

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Strengthening a defensive security framework against Russia implies widening, along with deepening. Such awareness made the Baltics among the strongest supporters of Finnish and Swedish NATO membership, which is key to increasing the overall strategic depth of the Baltic Sea region and broadening burden sharing efforts across the Gulf of Finland. The realisation that widening is key to western resilience and to containing Russia's imperialist appetites has been also an important reason for the Baltics' steadfast support for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Enhanced credibility

When size does not help, credibility might prove to be a key factor for states to be taken seriously. In the case of the Baltics, this has been fundamental. In supporting Ukraine, the Baltic states have not only "talked the talk", but very much "walked the walk". Among the first to travel to Ukraine as a visible show of solidarity, the Baltic leaders have committed very relevant national resources to support Kyiv's struggle, both in military and non-military terms. All the three Baltic states have welcomed a very significant number of refugees from Ukraine since February 2022, ranging from the 80,000 now present in Lithuania to the 43,000 in Estonia (more than three per cent of the country's population). Additionally, they have been pioneering significant military assistance to Ukraine, with Estonia donating more than one per cent of its GDP in direct military support to Ukraine.

The credibility of the Baltic voices vis-à-vis the broader western community is enhanced also by the fact that – unlike other partners in the region – they have been able to combine their unwavering support with a strong adherence to the values of liberal democracy. Looking around a Central and Eastern Europe increasingly characterised by rising illiberalism, the Baltics' weight and policy-shaping potential are likely to grow even more in international circles as some of the strongest liberal voices in the region. This provides the Baltics with a solid moral ground to counter Russia's imperialist expansionism not only in terms of security, but also in terms of values, through the prism of liberal democracy versus illiberal authoritarianism. Unlike Poland – the heavyweight of the region – they are also seen as rule-abiding, committed and, generally, pro-integration EU members.

In contrast to other western allies, the Baltic states have shown a very close alignment between public and elite understandings of Europe's new geopolitical reality. Supporting Ukraine factually, increasing defence budgets, talking about rearmament and bearing the related (tangible) costs have never been a taboo; and Baltic societies have proven extremely resilient. Such widespread societal support does not show, so far, significant signs of fatigue.

Estonia, which had general elections in March 2023, provides a very good example of societal resilience. The current prime minister, Kaja Kallas, confirmed as the country's leader in what can be defined as a liberal electoral wave, made no mystery of Russia's aggression in the campaign. Indeed, the country's security was the key electoral issue. Kallas did not hide the price of security, saying: "Gas may be expensive, but freedom is priceless." She stressed how stopping Russia in Ukraine is the only way to guarantee the country's long-term security.

Despite the populist right's attempt to electorally weaponise the cost of Tallinn's support to Ukraine and the large number of Ukrainian war refugees in the country, the voters have rewarded Kallas's determination and clear words and triggered the formation of the most liberal government in Estonia since 1991. The strong popular support for Kallas's leadership was confirmed by the record number of individual preferences received – the highest among any elected parliamentarian in modern Estonia.

"New Iron Lady"

The combination of a deep understanding of the geopolitical context, clear and consistent objectives and a high degree of credibility has allowed the Baltic states to exert very visible and tangible influence on NATO and the EU's new Russia policy, and in shaping western support for Ukraine. The Baltics have moved from being on the margins to the foreground in the collective policy-shaping and decision-making process. Their stance has been very much strengthened and amplified by the Baltic leaders' unprecedented global visibility. Kallas's highly respected voice both in EU and transatlantic circles has gained her the title of Europe's "New Iron Lady" and made her a potential candidate to succeed Jens Stoltenberg at the helm of NATO. The growing centrality of the Baltic narrative was recently exemplified by the visit of EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to Tallinn in February 2023 on the occasion of the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion, which coincides with Estonia's Independence Day.

As mentioned above, the combination of strong liberal democratic credentials, a robust commitment to Euro-Atlanticism and unwavering support for Ukraine makes the Baltic states the best ambassadors of New Europe's priorities in the transatlantic and European arenas. Very tangible results directly initiated by Tallinn, Riga or Vilnius include the EU joint arms procurement for Ukraine and changes in EU visa policy towards Russia and Belarus. There is no doubt that the magnitude of what has already been achieved by three of the smallest EU and NATO members far outweighs their geographical size.

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