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# HOW NATO ENLARGEMENT STRENGTHENS THE SECURITY OF THE EURO-ATLANTIC REGION: THE CASE OF THE BALTIC STATES

MEGI BENIA

159

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **EXPERT OPINION**

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*“Every European nation that struggles toward democracy and free markets and a strong civic culture must be welcomed into Europe’s home. All of Europe’s new democracies, from the Baltic to the Black Sea and all that lie between, should have the same chance for security and freedom and the same chance to join the institutions of Europe as Europe’s old democracies have.*

*I believe in NATO membership for all of Europe’s democracies that seek it and are ready to share the responsibility that NATO brings.”*

U.S. President George W. Bush, June 15, 2001

## **Introduction**

Since the end of the Cold War, with five waves of its enlargement, NATO remains committed to the open door policy. Even though these decisions have significantly strengthened the security of the Alliance, skepticism towards NATO enlargement stays on the agenda of debates in academic and policy circles.

After regaining independence from the Soviet Union, each of the Baltic States clearly stated their desire to become members of European and Euro-Atlantic organizations. In 2004, each of these states became full-fledged members of the North Atlantic Alliance. However, similar to the current situation, the accession of the Baltic States was not widely accepted in the academic and political circles of the time. While the Clinton administration did commit to “keep the membership door open” for the Baltics, neither official bodies nor professionals viewed the decision as a positive sign.<sup>1</sup> Even George Kennan had made his case against the Baltic entrance into NATO underlining that historically these nations had been “part of Russia longer than they were part of anything else.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite all of the difficulties, the Baltic nations joined the Alliance and thus proved that this enlargement and the open door policy overall is a guarantor of the security of the Euro-Atlantic region. Therefore, using the example of the Baltic States, the paper will try to emphasize the importance of NATO enlargement for peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region. The paper will demonstrate three main areas where the Alliance benefited the most from this wave of enlargement: a) enhanced peace and stability in the

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<sup>1</sup> Banka, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Euro-Atlantic region by the increased number of democratic, economically sustainable countries in Europe; b) the increased defensibility of NATO's eastern flank and c) the increased ability to strengthen NATO's resilience towards non-traditional security threats.

### **Enhanced Peace and Stability in the Euro-Atlantic Region**

First of all, the fifth NATO enlargement contributed greatly to the peace and stability of the Euro-Atlantic region by the increased number of democratic and economically sustainable countries in Europe. It is a well-known fact that the democratic systems based on the principle of law and order have proven to be the best guarantee of stability. The implementation of respective reforms is one of the main criteria for joining the Alliance. According to the Bureau of European and Canadian Affairs of the US State Department, one of the main requirements for NATO membership is: upholding democracy, including tolerating diversity and making progress toward a market economy.<sup>3</sup> Considering these circumstances, the Baltic States had been working on the modernization of their economies and the democratization of their political systems since regaining their independence.

#### ***Democratization***

In line with the transformation of the system of governance from socialism to a Western-style democracy, the biggest challenge for the Baltic States was the question of citizenship and national minorities. To meet the membership criteria, all three of the countries signed and ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

In *Estonia*, minorities are guaranteed opportunities for the preservation of their language and cultural distinctiveness, and the organisation of education and social activities in their mother tongue. The rights are defined by the Constitution. The Constitution also regulates the usage of minority languages in schools (the institution chooses the language of instruction) and local administration (this should be guaranteed in localities where at least one-half of the permanent residents belong to a national minority). In addition, the Cultural Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities Act defines the legal status and the rights of national minorities living in Estonia.

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<sup>3</sup> State.gov, 1997.

In *Latvia*, minority rights are guaranteed by Article 114 of the Latvian Constitution: “Persons belonging to ethnic minorities have the right to preserve and develop their language and their ethnic and cultural identity.”<sup>4</sup> It is further secured in the Law on the Unrestricted Development and Right to Cultural Autonomy of Latvia’s Nationalities and Ethnic Groups (adopted in 1991)<sup>5</sup> ensuring that government institutions “promote the creation of material conditions for the development of the education, language and culture of nationalities and ethnic groups residing within Latvia’s territory, through allocating funds from the national budget for such purposes.”<sup>6</sup>

The Baltic States worked closely with the OSCE and the EU to bring their citizenship and electoral laws in compliance with OSCE and EU norms. Both organizations have certified that the laws of the Baltic states today fully conform to OSCE and EU norms.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Economic Transformation***

The Baltic States implemented economic reforms that laid the foundation for liberal-market economic systems with high-powered economic incentives, free markets and small public sectors.

According to Åslund, “after the collapse of the Soviet Union, all three managed to limit their inflation to about 1,000 percent in 1992 but their output was in a free fall. The Baltic countries did not return to economic growth until 1995. Their economies grew soundly from 1996 to 1998 but the Russian financial crash of 1998 wiped out their growth once again.”<sup>8</sup>

From 2000, the three Baltic economies started growing at an average of 8-9 percent a year. Since 2012, they have each recorded the highest growth rates in the EU. From 2011 to 2014, the three countries had an average annual growth rate of 4.1 percent as compared with only 0.7 percent for the EU as a whole. The Baltic economies have converged significantly with the EU economies as a result.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Constitution of Latvia.

<sup>5</sup> OHCHR, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> MFA of Latvia, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Committee on Foreign Relations, 2003, p. 119.

<sup>8</sup> Åslund, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## **Increased Defensibility of NATO's Eastern Flank**

NATO's eastern flank is the most vulnerable sector of the Alliance, one that is "increasingly exposed to penetration and subversion"<sup>10</sup> by Russia. The Baltic Sea is of utmost strategic importance for the Alliance. Therefore, an important component of NATO's "strengthened deterrence and defense posture is a military presence in the eastern and south-eastern parts of the Alliance's territory."<sup>11</sup>

During the Cold War, the Baltic Sea region was "a 'no-man's land' on the periphery of the main axis of confrontation in central Europe. This relative geostrategic marginalization of the Baltic Sea region facilitated the emergence of a distinctive 'Nordic balance.' This consisted of two neutral states (Finland and Sweden) along with two Nordic NATO states (Norway and Denmark) that had a special status within the Alliance: neither country allowed nuclear weapons or foreign troops to be permanently stationed on their territory. The success of the Nordic balance meant that throughout the years of Cold War confrontation, the Baltic Sea region remained a relatively low-tension area."<sup>12</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union transformed the existing security environment in the Baltic Sea region. The Baltic Sea became an important aspect of common European security. Accordingly, the fifth NATO enlargement increased the Alliance's ability to defend its eastern flank both at the collective and national levels. As another important requirement for NATO membership is compatibility with NATO forces<sup>13</sup> and Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have put significant efforts into the modernization of their defense systems over the last two decades. Consequently, these countries today have the capacity of defending themselves and the allies, and are contributing to international NATO-led missions and operations.

### ***Military Performance of the Baltic Nations***

First, all three of the Baltic States have significantly improved their military performance.

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<sup>10</sup> Ben Hodges, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Hyde-Price, 1998-2000.

<sup>13</sup> State.gov, 1997.

*Estonia's* defense budget has increased from USD 0.01 billion in 1993 to USD 0.66 billion in 2021.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the Estonian government has developed a longstanding and highly developed territorial defense, resilience and resistance plans and capabilities as well as a commitment to fielding additional conventional military capabilities.<sup>15</sup>

*Latvia's* defense budget has increased from USD 0.02 billion in 1993 to USD 0.71 billion in 2021.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the Latvian government has given priority to developing a professional army over the past decade but it has now committed to modernizing conventional forces, enhancing the size and capabilities of its National Guard force and improving whole-of-society resilience efforts.<sup>17</sup>

*Lithuania's* defense budget has increased from USD 0.02 billion in 1993 to USD 1.08 billion in 2021.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the Lithuanian government has prioritized its conventional forces but is also taking steps to bolster the training and capabilities of the national guard and volunteer forces, and has launched a major effort to educate its citizens on resilience and resistance in the case of invasion.<sup>19</sup>

All three countries are improving and expanding their relatively small special operations forces (SOF) with assistance from the United States and other countries.<sup>20</sup>

Second, over the last decades the Baltic nations have successfully contributed to NATO-led missions and operations.

The *Estonians* served in Iraq from 2003-2009. At the peak of operations, the Estonians had 40 personnel and served under the American command.<sup>21</sup> In Iraq, Estonia lost two soldiers killed in action and 18 were wounded in action.<sup>22</sup> The Estonians served in Afghanistan as part of the ISAF mission and rotated reinforced infantry companies into the country assigned to British-

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<sup>14</sup> Macrotrends n.d.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen J. Flangan, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Macrotrends, Latvia Military Spending/Defense Budget 1993-2021 n.d.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen J. Flangan, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Macrotrends, Lithuania Military Spending/Defense Budget 1993-2021 n.d.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen J. Flangan, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Corum, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



led forces. In addition, Estonia sent additional staff officers and personnel to the Implementation Force (IFOR) and civilians and military and police personnel to support teams training the Afghan forces and government personnel.<sup>23</sup> The Estonian commitment in Afghanistan is ongoing with 45 personnel contributing to the RSM mission.<sup>24</sup>

The *Lithuanian Army* maintained a force of 120 soldiers in Iraq from 2003 to 2007, serving under the Danish and Polish headquarters.<sup>25</sup> The Lithuanians provided a highly capable special operations team as well as more than 180 personnel in Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup> Now, the Lithuanians are contributing to the RSM mission with 40 personnel on the ground.<sup>27</sup>

From 2003 to 2008, *Latvia* committed a company-sized force of 136 soldiers to serve under the US command in Iraq.<sup>28</sup> Three Latvians were killed in action and others were wounded.<sup>29</sup> In Afghanistan, the Latvians maintained one company element in the country under NATO's IFOR command.<sup>30</sup> Now, the Latvians are contributing to the RSM mission with two personnel on the ground.<sup>31</sup>

The armed forces of the three Baltic States have also deployed a variety of specialist teams in support of coalition operations. In 2010, the three Baltic States had more than 750 personnel, including civilian government specialist personnel and military personnel serving in Afghanistan.<sup>32</sup>

This demonstrates a significant commitment of personnel and resources for these nations, thus proving that even small countries with advanced military capabilities and high standards can contribute to Euro-Atlantic security and strengthen the overall performance of the Alliance. Subsequently, for instance, Estonia, “a country of 1.35 million people with a peacetime armed forces of 5,500 personnel and a wartime armed forces of 16,000, deployed two infantry companies and support elements to

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> NATO, Resolute Support Mission (RSM) “placemat” (Key Facts and Figures), 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Corum, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> NATO, Resolute Support Mission (RSM) “placemat” (Key Facts and Figures), 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Corum, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> NATO, Resolute Support Mission (RSM) “placemat” (Key Facts and Figures), 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Corum, 2013.

Afghanistan in 2009—a total of 300 men—which constituted 5.5 percent of the total peacetime force.”<sup>33</sup>

### ***NATO Exercises and Programs in the Baltic States***

#### *Enhanced Forward Presence*<sup>34</sup>

As part of NATO’s strengthened deterrence and defense posture, the allies agreed to enhance NATO’s military presence in the eastern part of the Alliance at the 2016 summit in Warsaw. Fully deployed in June 2017, NATO’s enhanced forward presence comprises multinational forces. They are based on four rotational battalion-size battlegroups that operate in concert with national home defense forces and are present at all times in the host countries. Enhanced forward presence forces are complemented by the necessary logistics and infrastructure to support pre-positioning and to facilitate rapid reinforcement.

#### *NATO Air Policing Mission*<sup>35</sup>

When the three Baltic States joined NATO in 2004, a NATO Air Policing capability was established at the Šiauliai Air Base, Lithuania. In 2014, after Russia’s illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea, a second Air Policing presence was established at the Ämari Air Base, Estonia, under NATO’s Assurance Measures to its eastern allies. Allies take turns deploying to air bases in Šiauliai, Lithuania and Ämari, Estonia, on a four-month rotational basis, ready to be launched by NATO’s Combined Air Operations Centre in Uedem, Germany if required. The Air Forces of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia contribute to the mission with host nation support in the form of air command and control infrastructure and personnel. Fighter aircraft assigned to NATO’s Baltic Air Policing mission are often launched to visually identify Russian Federation Air Force aircraft.

#### *BALTOPS – Baltic Operations*

The Baltops exercise is the largest multinational exercise in the Baltic Sea.<sup>36</sup> Its purpose is to improve maritime security in the region through partnership and the sharing of resources as well as to enhance cooperation among

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<sup>33</sup> Corum, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> NATO, Boosting NATO’s Presence in the East and Southeast n.d.

<sup>35</sup> AIRCOM n.d.

<sup>36</sup> Royal Navy n.d.

the Baltic States. The exercise also provides an excellent opportunity to test the skills and capabilities of the participating nations and – crucially – their ability to work together. Held in the Baltic region since 1972, BALTOPS provides the premier maritime-focused training exercise for NATO allies and partners. Training events include air defense, anti-submarine warfare, maritime interdiction and mine countermeasure operations to build capable and united forces ready to carry out their core tasks.

In BALTOPS 2020,<sup>37</sup> Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO implemented the latest technology into their Joint Operations Centre to enable command and control of the exercise from their headquarters in Lisbon, Portugal. The new capabilities include recognized maritime picture viewing, air command and control, NATO common operational picture feeds, network integrated real-time information services, logistic functional areas services, video collaboration and information sharing tools, joint targeting systems for operational planning and a tactical data link to communicate with allied ships at sea.

## **Opportunities for the Future**

Considering the recent developments and intensified Russian activities on the eastern borders of the Alliance, the need for further strengthening this NATO flank increases dramatically. “A high proportion of Russian Federation Air Force flight activity is being observed in Baltic air space due to the geographical situation of the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. Russian Federation Air Force aircraft regularly fly from mainland Russia to Kaliningrad and vice versa. They often approach or fly near NATO airspace without using transponders, communicating with air traffic control or having filed a flight plan.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore, to deter and restrict the increasingly frequent Russian incursions into Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian airspace, it is of utmost importance “to convert Air Policing to Air Defense, increase air/missile defense capabilities in the Baltic States and to develop mid-range air defense capabilities that would cover the entire territory of the Baltic States and significantly strengthen the current NATO air-policing mission.”<sup>39</sup> Without the Baltic States’ NATO membership, fulfilling this task would have been an impossible mission. The old approach of keeping this

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<sup>37</sup> STRIKFORNATO n.d.

<sup>38</sup> AIRCOM n.d.

<sup>39</sup> Ben Hodges, 2019.

territory as a buffer zone between the Alliance and Russia would have limited the opportunity for significant maneuvers.

### **Increased Ability to Strengthen NATO's Resilience Towards Non-traditional Security Threats**

In a modern security environment, the non-traditional security threats such as propaganda, deception, sabotage, disinformation, cyber-attacks, economic pressure, terrorism and other non-military tactics are the main challenges for the security of nations and organizations.

NATO pays significant attention to strengthening resilience towards non-traditional security challenges. Accordingly, NATO adopted the Enhanced Cyber Defense Policy at the Wales Summit in 2014 which was further updated at the Warsaw Summit 2016 where the allies recognized cyberspace as a domain of operations and approved the Cyber Defense Pledge.<sup>40</sup> In addition, NATO continues the gradual modernization of its policies in the process of adaptation to the changed security environment. In this process, the Baltic States play a key role due to the fact that they have a long history of dealing with the destabilizing measures of the Russian Federation. In 2007, Estonia was hit by major cyber-attacks. In 2020, an e-mail letter from NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was delivered to the Minister of National Defense of Lithuania falsely informing of a decision to withdraw NATO forces from Lithuania. There is also the case of a controversial monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from German Fascist Invaders which periodically becomes the subject of Russian disinformation and propaganda.

All of these developments together with the numerous cases of unconventional activities on the part of Russia forced these countries to develop a number of successful ways for dealing with disinformation, cyber and other hybrid activities. For instance, the International Telecommunication Union's Global Cybersecurity Index 2018 ranked Lithuania fourth and Estonia fifth in the world based on the measurements of legal, technical, organizational, capacity building, and cooperation measures related to cyber security.

With the Baltic States, NATO has the advantage of strengthening its resilience towards non-traditional security threats. To this end, Estonia

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<sup>40</sup> NATO, Cyber defence, 2020.

hosts the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence which was opened in 2008.<sup>41</sup> The center aims at fostering cooperation, capabilities and information-sharing on cyber security between NATO countries using, for instance, exercises, law and policy workshops, technical courses and conferences to prepare NATO and sponsoring nations to detect and fight cyber-attacks. It also conducts research and training in several areas of cyber warfare. Latvia hosts the Strategic Communications (StratCom) COE which was opened in 2014.<sup>42</sup> The center aims at developing improved strategic communications capabilities within the Alliance by helping to advance doctrine development and harmonization, conduct research and experimentation, identify lessons learned from applied StratCom during operations and enhance training and education. It also operates as a hub for debate within various StratCom disciplines: public diplomacy, public affairs, military public affairs, information operations and psychological operations.

Considering the rapid changes in the modern security environment, “NATO must be able to handle numerous, simultaneous events of a disruptive and non-traditional nature”<sup>43</sup> as was outlined in the recent expert report entitled NATO 2030: United for a New Era. Therefore, the Alliance can heavily rely on the experience and success of the Baltic States in dealing with unconventional security challenges.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has outlined the three main areas where the Alliance benefited the most from this wave of enlargement. First, the Baltic States’ NATO membership has increased the number of democratic and economically sustainable countries in Europe as the implementation of respective reforms is one of the main criteria for joining the Alliance. It is a well-known fact that the democratic systems based on the principle of law and order have proven to be the best guarantee of stability. Secondly, the fifth NATO enlargement has increased the Alliance’s ability to defend its eastern flank both at the collective and national levels. Over the last two decades, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have put significant efforts into the modernization of their defense systems. Accordingly, these countries have

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<sup>41</sup> NATO, Centres of Excellence n.d.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> A. Wess Mitchell, 2020.

the capacity of defending themselves and the allies which is a cornerstone of NATO membership. Finally, with the Baltic States, NATO has the advantage of strengthening its resilience towards the non-traditional security threats since these countries have developed a number of successful ways of dealing with disinformation, cyber and other hybrid activities.

By overviewing the example of the Baltic States, this paper once again demonstrated how NATO enlargement strengthens the security of the Euro-Atlantic region. The open door policy of the Alliance is one of the most effective and successful policies that ensures peace and stability in Euro-Atlantic region. As US President George H. W. Bush emphasized in his speech on May 31, 1989, delivered in Mainz, West Germany: “For 40 years, the seeds of democracy in Eastern Europe lay dormant, buried under the frozen tundra of the Cold War. And for 40 years, the world has waited for the Cold War to end. And decade after decade, time after time, the flowering human spirit withered from the chill of conflict and oppression; and again, the world waited. But the passion for freedom cannot be denied forever. The world has waited long enough. The time is right. Let Europe be whole and free.”

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