

From Blind Love to Strategic Alliance? BALTIC-GEORGIAN RELATIONS REVISITED

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Since the restoration of independence, Georgia and the Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – have established dynamic relationships that have evolved into forms of strategic cooperation. Over the last two decades, many have seen Georgia and the Baltics, along with Moldova and (somewhat) Ukraine, as a potential “belt of freedom and democracy” alongside Russia. As Georgia entered the post-Soviet era without natural allies or a history of reliable alliances, the Baltic states have proven to be loyal partners, as well as to all the Caucasian states when they needed support in their various tussles with Russia. Increasingly, geopolitical developments taking place around the Black and Baltic Seas have provided a new impetus for closer Baltic-Georgian relations. Although Russia has reconciled itself with the independence of the Baltic states, Moscow seems to have a difficult time swallowing the idea of independent Georgia. As Georgia tries to balance Moscow’s influence in its internal affairs and strives for Euro-Atlantic integration, cementing a close partnership with Eastern European states becomes essential. Similarly, Moscow’s policies vis-à-vis its smaller neighbors reinvigorated the Baltic states’ traditional security concerns and catalyzed their interest toward further involvement in the Caucasus. A number of factors lie behind this change, including Georgia's rapid transformation, growing energy security concerns, and the mounting strategic importance of the Caucasus in light of the potentially looming Iran crisis.

The Baltics and the Caucasus: Two Regions, Two Pathways

In order to understand Baltic-Georgian relations, one must look at the regional dynamics of both regions. After the collapse of Soviet Union, both the Baltic and Caucasus regions emerged as battlegrounds for competition among larger actors. Although both regions had their chance to become centers for further integration projects, the two regions chose different ways of development. The Baltic states managed to strengthen their regional bonds and become full-fledged members of the European security system. The

Caucasus, on the other hand, struggled to define itself, descended into ethnic conflict, and got preoccupied with state-building exercises. Likewise, while regional unity in the Caucasus remained a large hurdle, the Baltic states succeeded in overcoming regional problems, constructing functioning states and developing a viable regional security architecture. In the field of security, the Baltic states now consider the possibility of joint defense (including joint purchase of military and other special equipment in order to ensure more efficient use of existing resources) and participation in international missions, quite in contrast to the security environment that dominates in the Caucasus. As observers acknowledge, a certain common cultural background, political rationality, and clear economic advantages have played key roles in the establishment of close regional ties among the states of the Baltic Sea region.

The biggest difference between the Baltic region and the Caucasus remains their respective stances toward regional development models. As the Baltic states grew to accept the idea of a Baltic Sea region as an EU sub-region with a strong regional identity, the South Caucasus as a sub-region still remains without a proper “regional identity.” With its ill-defined borders, weak economic links, and lack of a shared identity, the Caucasus is not a coherent region, which undermines regional development and security. The debate over where the Caucasus region broadly belongs, how it more narrowly fits into the EU ballpark (either collectively or individually), and what functionality it has in global politics remains an important feature of the region’s internal and international relations.

Geopolitics Still Matter

As for Georgia in particular, foreign policy has revolved primarily, if not solely, around the imperative of enhancing security vis-à-vis Russia. One can say that after the United States and Poland, Georgians consider the Baltic states to be among the most – if not the most – reliable security partners. Shared visions, values, and aspirations have helped to form close bonds. More than most EU members, the Baltic states have a vision of a wider, stronger, and more open Europe. While Baltic foreign policy and interests might differ significantly in their specifics, they share an attitude of support and camaraderie toward Georgia and other neighbors like Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova. Having successfully transformed their own countries into free market democracies, the Baltic states hope to pass on their reform experiences to other post-communist states that desire to implement similar reforms.

While pursuing an active and productive foreign policy within the EU, the Baltic states retain the aim of strengthening Baltic-Black Sea regional solidarity. The transfer of stability and security from the Baltic states to the Caucasus is seen as a desirable endeavor. Georgia, in particular, evinces great interest in such cooperation. From the Georgian perspective, the Baltic model of development is a clear success story in the history of EU integration and represents a positive example for Eastern Partnership countries that are still on their way to the EU. Georgia also wants to emulate the Baltic states in their political discourse and transformation of political institutions. The Baltic example also represents a role model for the kind of security Georgia wishes to achieve.

Links with the Baltic space are also important for Georgia from a geopolitical perspective, as partnership means more options for countering Russian influence. Like Georgia, the Baltic states' post-Soviet geopolitical identity has been based on Russia as their greatest threat. With Russia seeking to pressure Georgia to accommodate its geopolitical interests, neither Georgia nor the Baltic states want to see growing Russian influence in the Caucasus. It was no accident that the Baltics were founding members of the "new group of friends of Georgia" set up in 2005. The group's chief goal was to assist Georgia in its bid for European and Euro-Atlantic integration by putting to good use the experience of the Group's members. This informal gathering of several European states has provided expertise and advice to Tbilisi – they understand what it means to fight for sovereignty and maintain an independent foreign policy under the shadow of a big neighbor.

In view of the parallels between the situations of the Baltic states and Georgia, the emergence of close bilateral relations has been a natural development. The Baltic states' support for Georgia's aspirations to NATO and EU membership has been instrumental for the harmonization of national legislation and institutions, as well as for reforming the defense sector and other spheres of public policy. Although Georgia is not a NATO member, it has made tremendous contributions to the NATO-led international efforts in Afghanistan by deploying nearly 1,000 troops under French and U.S. command. This move has created a new dynamic in Georgian-Baltic relations. In fact, relations with the Baltic states have emerged as a foreign policy priority for Georgia. Its national security concept, adopted by the Georgian parliament in December 2011, separately notes "active cooperation" with the Baltic states, while emphasizing the "huge importance of cooperation" with Eastern and Central European states, as well as with Scandinavian countries.

Common security interests have led to stronger ties between Georgia and the Baltics, including cooperation on energy, cyber security, and national defense issues. During the August 2008 Russian-Georgian war, Estonia sent cyber security experts to Georgia and took over the hosting of the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website after cyber attacks essentially shut down Georgian government communications. The 2012 Defense Cooperation Plan between Georgia and Lithuania anticipates the study of Georgian representatives at the Lithuanian Military Academy and the Baltic Defense College in Tartu (Estonia), military medics, and noncommissioned officer courses. Lithuania foresees sending representatives of its Land Forces to Georgia's Sachkhere Mountain-Training School and conducting meetings for logistics and civil-military cooperation specialists. Exchanges and consultations have also covered the development of the National Security Concept of Georgia, procurement issues, training, and education.

In the economic field, Baltic markets are important for the Georgian economy, in light of the ongoing Russian ban on Georgian products such as wine and mineral water. Great efforts were made to encourage Georgian exports to the Baltic region and, at the same time, sustain investments from the Baltic states to Georgia. It is expected that an

active Baltic policy toward Georgia will strengthen commercial relations and set the stage for Baltic investment in the region.

Finally, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have identified Georgia as a core target country for development assistance cooperation. They have consolidated their capacity and financial resources and coordinated activities. Development cooperation has focused on education, good governance, and democracy building, as well as economic development and environmental sustainability. After Georgia's Rose Revolution in Georgia, former Estonia prime minister Mart Laar advised the Georgian government on the carrying out of liberal reforms. While assistance to date has been limited in financial terms, it has made Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania stakeholders in Georgian affairs.

The Russia-Georgia Conflict and its Implications for Baltic-Georgian Relations

The Russia-Georgia war of 2008 stirred painful memories of Soviet occupation in the Baltic states. They watched with dismay as the West failed to offer Georgia effective support during the conflict. They also understandably rallied behind Georgia against Russia's military incursion. Some Baltic officials and commentators even considered that Russia's invasion presaged a potential threat to their own independence. Although, unlike Georgia, the Baltic states enjoy the security guarantees that come with NATO membership, not even these eliminate their sense of insecurity as their relations with Russia remain complicated.

The war also demonstrated to political elites that the territorial integrity of small states still cannot be taken for granted, even within Europe. With significant ethnic Russian minorities, Estonia and Latvia were particularly alarmed by Russia's public explanation that it had invaded Georgia to protect the rights of Russian citizens. The war also raised a host of uncomfortable questions regarding the future security of the Baltic and Black Sea regions. The overall response of the West, which was perceptibly weak, increased the general uncertainty. On a pragmatic level, the war gave the Baltic states crucial insights into Russian foreign policy toward small neighbors and solidified their view that oversimplifying or ignoring the Russian threat could be quite risky.

The Baltic states continue to press Russia more than other EU members to fulfill its obligations under the six-point August 2008 ceasefire agreement that was concluded with French President Nicolas Sarkozy's mediation. Along with Great Britain and Poland, the Baltic states are in favor of a tougher stance toward Russia's fulfillment of commitments it undertook under the cease-fire agreement. Lithuania was the first to condemn Russia's occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, followed by similar resolutions by the European Parliament and the U.S. Senate. The Georgian public appreciated the moral and political support they received from the Baltic states during the war. By traveling to Tbilisi as the war concluded and demonstrating their firm support for the democratic choices of the Georgian people, Baltic leaders, together with the Polish leadership, managed to win the hearts and minds of many Georgians.

Conclusion

After the war, other Europeans sometimes criticized the Baltic states, especially Lithuania, for caring too much about Georgia at the expense of EU solidarity on foreign policy issues. Their policy was said to be not in tune with that of EU heavyweights like Germany or France, which adopted more conciliatory approaches toward Russia after the war. Nonetheless, the Baltic states continue to concretely assist Georgia in its efforts to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures. While NATO members like Germany and France said that pushing for a MAP for Georgia meant unnecessarily complicating relations with Russia, the Baltic states actively supported Georgia's stance on conflict resolution. Although analysts in both regions assert that the foreign policy of the Baltic states toward Georgia has become more moderate, there is no clear evidence of this. On the contrary, the Baltic states have been instrumental in pushing for EU-Georgia talks on the establishment of a deep and comprehensive free trade area. They also spoke out in favor of launching visa facilitation talks between Tbilisi and Brussels. Coupled with the solid commitments Tbilisi made to enable the EU-Georgia visa facilitation agreement, the Baltic states' firm advocacy likely contributed to its entry into force in March 2011.

In contrast to Western frowning on Georgia's leadership after the conflict and reluctance to accept Georgia as a NATO member, the Baltic states' political support for Georgia has been consistent. Comparing the Georgian plight regarding Euro-Atlantic and European integration to their integration bids back in the 1990s, the Baltic states have been strongly sympathetic to Georgia. Likewise, as Georgia seeks ways to ensure its security and work toward Euro-Atlantic integration, the Baltic model inspires it as a vivid example of how small states during a relatively short period of time can transform their security systems and integrate into NATO.