

THE REGIONAL APPROACH IN THE POLICY OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION TOWARDS THE REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA

D. Lanko*



This author uses regionalism as a theoretical framework for analyzing the foreign policy of the Russian Federation towards the Republic of Estonia. Regionalism is interpreted as a situation, when a political leader's beliefs change depending on what region of the world is considered. Leaders of great powers often assume that, for example, small European countries are subject to a treatment different from that of small Middle Eastern countries. The method of operational coding is employed to identify the impact of the regional approach on the beliefs of political leaders. The author comes to the conclusion that Russia's policy towards Estonia largely depends on Russia's policy towards the regions which the Russian elite relate Estonia to — the Baltic States, Northern Europe, and Europe as a whole. The results of the study can further the understanding of Russia's policy towards Estonia both in Russia and abroad. Lack of understanding sometimes results in sharing the views of radical Estonian politicians who claim that Russia's policy towards Estonia is unpredictable and thus poses a threat to security and stability in Europe.

Key words: international relations, foreign policy analysis, Russia, Estonia, regionalism, military political blocks

The fundamental documents regulating the foreign policy of the Russian Federation never refer to the Republic of Estonia as an independent player in the international arena; it is always mentioned in the context of interaction between the Russian Federation and the three Baltic States: Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation adopted in 2000 by President Vladimir Putin stressed that “there are good prospects for the development of the Russian Federation's relations with Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia” [1]. The foreign policy concept adopted in

* Saint Petersburg State University
7—9, Universitetskaya nab.,
Saint Petersburg, 199034, Russia

Submitted on May 31, 2013.

doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2013-3-4

© Lanko D., 2013

2008 in the aftermath of the election of D. A. Medvedev as the president of Russia declared that “The Russian Federation is willing to interact with Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in the spirit of good-neighborliness and on the basis of reciprocal consideration of interests” [2]. Finally, the new foreign policy concept adopted in February 2013, does not mention Estonia at all: it is only stressed that “Russia’s participation in the activities of the Council of the Baltic Sea States plays an important role” in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation [3].

As will be shown below, Russia’s policy towards Estonia is an element of the strategy towards the three Baltic States (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia), the Northern European countries, including the Scandinavian countries, Finland, Iceland, the UK, and Ireland, and Europe in general. The effect of the latter factor is especially pronounced in Russia’s protection of the rights of compatriots in Estonia according to the European standards — Russia’s position on the issue is much stricter than might be expected. This phenomenon, typical of the foreign policy of not only Russia but also other powers, for example the USA, towards smaller states, is called the regional approach. I focus on the meaning of this category in a number of studies (for example, [4]); here it will be considered in the context of Russia’s policy towards the Republic of Estonia.

The concept of the regional approach

The political views of the heads of state are of great importance for foreign policy. Of course, the position of a political leader on a certain issue based on their ideas is not the only factor affecting the process of decision-making in the field of foreign policy. A foreign policy analysis should also include an assessment of the current condition of international relations system, the position of the given state within the system, the approaches of other major players in international relations and world politics in relation to the given problem, etc. As to the home politics factors, one must take into account public opinion, the perspectives of influential stakeholders, the approaches of different political parties to the problem, the structure of relations between different branches of power, the features of the organisation of the decision-making process in home politics and their implementation by the executive power institutions, etc. At the same time, one cannot ignore the statements of political leaders. Particularly, when the number of research works stressing that “political leaders exercise this power over an area comprising foreign affairs, defence” [5, p. 15] is growing. At the same time, “there are, admittedly, substantial variations, not merely because of the environment ..., but also for personal reasons” [5, p. 15]. In other words, the position of a political leader influences not only certain decision in the field of foreign policy but also the degree, to which the given leader intervenes in the decision-making process in the given state. It is not surprising that the beliefs of the political leaders have become the focus of much research by scholars engaged in foreign policy analysis.

One of the ways of studying the entrenched opinions of political leaders is based on the application of the operational coding methods in international relation studies. The operational code is an aggregate of a political leader’s beliefs that determine their role in decision-making in the field of foreign pol-

icy. The notion of the operational code was first introduced in the 1950s by N. Leites and has not lost its relevance [7]. Therefore, the operational coding is a remote identification method based on analysing the public speeches of a political leader dedicated to a certain issue, which makes it possible to compare them with the statements of contemporaries, predecessors, and successors.

The beliefs of political leaders as elements of their operational code are divided into philosophical and instrumental ones. The philosophical beliefs relate to the 'nature' of the existing international relations system, for instance, the role of incident in international relations, the ability of a certain state to control the course of historical development, etc. The instrumental beliefs relate to the way the given state conducts its foreign policy in view of the existing 'nature' of international relations: to what degree cooperation/conflict is an efficient foreign policy tactic, to what degree risk is admissible in foreign policy, etc.

Both the philosophical and instrumental beliefs of a political leader change with time. The instrumental position can also change depending on the policy of what state or group of states is considered.

The changes in the objectives and means of foreign policy depending on the situation are called an "approach". For example, a situation when a leader believes that different ethnic groups 'deserve' different treatment can be described as a manifestation of a racial approach or, in simple words, racism. A situation where a leader believes that different ethnic groups should also be treated differently can, by analogy, be considered as the national approach or nationalism. A good example of a study stressing that the national approach has a significant effect on the foreign policy of a major power is the work of Mearsheimer and Walt on the role of the Israeli lobby in US foreign policy [8]. However, all in all, the role of the national and racial approaches in the foreign policy of major powers is insignificant. The aspiration to avoid a national and racial approach is a cherished value of most major powers, including Russia, the USA, and Western European powers.

In the foreign policy of major powers, including Russia and the USA, great significance is attached to the regional approach — the position, according to which countries of different regions are treated differently. For example, as Renshon shows [9], the instrumental beliefs of the 43rd president of the USA, George Bush Jr, changed with time, especially after 2001, and from region to region. So, Bush justified risk-taking when dealing with the countries of the Western Hemisphere or Europe, however, in the case of the Middle East, the American leader believed, any decision had to be considered and reconsidered. As Bush often stressed in his speeches, "the stakes are high" in the Middle East [10]. For the Russian President, Putin, as Dyson argues [11], risk is less admissible in foreign policy than for his American counterpart, Bush.

At the same time, the attitude of the Russian leader towards taking risks in the field of foreign policy does not change from region to region, i. e., in this aspect, it is not affected by the regional approach. However, his view on the extent to which cooperation/conflict is an efficient foreign policy tactic is explained by the regional approach. So, according to my analysis of Putin's operational code [4, p. 321], the Russian leader believes that cooperation in the Western direction is an efficient tool of achieving the goals and objectives of foreign policy, whereas, in the East, calls for cooperation are often considered a sign of weakness. Therefore,

in the East, cooperation cannot be efficient in pursuing national interests. It is one of the reasons for the differences between Russia and the West concerning Middle East policy. Quite often, the countries of the West base their Middle Eastern policy on the assumption that there are forces in the region that are ready to cooperate according to the “Western understanding” of the idea of cooperation.

As a result, situations when, as the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lavrov puts it [12] ‘...in Mali, the French have to fight terrorists who are closely connected to “some of the terrorists”, who the French army cooperated with in Libya not long before that. It can hardly be understood by the Russian side’. So, the regional approach affects the beliefs of both the Russian and American leaders, which makes it possible to say that it defines the policy of major powers towards smaller states in general.

The difficulty of understanding the regional approach lies in the fact that a number of countries cannot be related to any one particular region. For example, countries such as Turkey, Israel, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan can be considered by certain leaders as European and by others as Middle Eastern. The position on these countries will depend on whether they are considered European or Middle Eastern. So, if Bush speaks of Turkey in the context of US policy in Europe, in his opinion, risk taking will be more justified than if Turkey were mentioned in the context of US policy in the Middle East. If Putin speaks of Turkey in the context of Russian policy in the Middle East, in his opinion, calls for cooperation will not be an efficient foreign policy tool, unlike a situation when Turkey were considered in the context of the policy in a European direction. At the same time, it is one and the same country which is considered in all cases. The regional approach has a similar effect on the policy of the Russian Federation towards the Republic of Estonia. If Turkey is situated at the border of the regions of Europe and the Middle East, Estonia is located at the border of European and post-Soviet space.

Estonia and other Baltic States between the European and the post-Soviet spaces

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Republic of Estonia, as well as the two other Baltic States — Lithuania and Latvia — did not accede to the Commonwealth of Independent States and aspired to joining the European and Euro-Atlantic cooperation institutions, first of all, the European Union and NATO. Therefore, in the structure of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian policy towards Estonia was commissioned not to the departments engaged in coordinating Russian foreign policy towards the CIS, but to the Second European Department tackling daily issues of Russian policy towards the countries of the North, including the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Sweden, and Norway), Finland, Iceland, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and, after 1991, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Moreover, this department also participates in solving Russian problems within the Council of Baltic Sea States, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, and the Arctic Council.

In the 1990s, many representatives of the Russian elite perceived the Baltic States as former Soviet republics and thus as part of the post-Soviet space.

In this connection, the aspiration of the Baltic States to accede to NATO was a more thorny issue for the Russian Federation than the same aspiration of the Czech Republic and Poland, to say nothing of Bulgaria and Albania. As a result, within the beliefs of Russian leaders, the Baltic States were attached significance disproportional to their areas, population, their share in mutual trade with Russia, and their effect on the national security of the Russian Federation. One of the indicators of the exaggerated role of these three countries, in particular, Estonia, is the attention paid to the problem of relations between Russia and the Baltic States by the Russian Council of Foreign and Defence Policy [13; 14]. In the 1990s, it was one of the most influential governmental organisations affecting the foreign policy of the country.

In the 1990s, one of the alleged ways to prevent the Baltic States from acceding to NATO was the refusal of the Russian party to sign boundary treaties with these countries. At the time, the USA and other major powers — influential NATO members — were cautious about the prospect of welcoming states with unsettled territorial disputes with neighbours. Thus, the Russian Federation had an opportunity to quote certain Baltic leaders, who demanded the revision of the border with Russia, as proof that these countries had territorial claims against neighbours and, therefore, could not accede to NATO. In Estonia, it was the members of the Estonian parliament — the Riigikogu — from the Pro Patria Union party, including its head and ex-Prime Minister, Laar, a historian by training and one of the authors of an infamous textbook on Estonian history [15], which gives a very biased assessment of Russian-Estonian relations from antiquity to the end of the 20th century.

It is worth noting that it was not only the Russian elite which considered Estonia and other Baltic States in the 1990s as countries ‘sandwiched’ between Europe and the post-Soviet space. Some Estonians, first of all those who lived abroad during the Soviet period and returned to Estonia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, also stressed this fact. For example, the American-Estonian scholar, Taagepera, a physicist by training, who ran for President in the 1992 election, took and active part in Estonian politics, and also gained certain popularity as a political scientist, wrote that, from the perspective of political literacy, the Estonians of the turn of the 20th century were not “proper” Europeans: their culture featured mixed political values — both those characteristic of most European countries and those typical of the post-Soviet space. Taagepera used this fact to explain the unprecedented increase in corruption that took place in Estonia immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union [16].

Despite Russian criticism, Estonia, as well as Latvia and Lithuania, acceded to NATO in 2004. The boundary treaty between Russia and Lithuania was signed in 2003 and between Latvia and Russia in 2007. It is one of the aspects of the effect exerted by the regional approach: Russian policy towards Estonia is affected by its relations with the other Baltic States, in particular, Latvia. In the same way, Russian-Estonian relations affect the interaction between Russia and the other Baltic States, including Latvia. At the same time, the deterioration of relations with one of the countries of the region can result in both the deterioration of relations with all countries of the region and their improvement — to ‘spite’ the former country. This is what happened in Russian-Estonian and Russian-Latvian relations in 2005—2007.

Technically, the Estonian and Latvian governments withdrew their claims for parts of the Leningrad and Pskov regions of the Russian Federation as early as the late 1990s. However, in both countries, certain radical politicians had been bringing up the issue of revisiting the political claims before the boundary treaties between the states were signed. So, in January 2005, the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Latvian Saeima approved recommendations for the boundary treaty with Russia, which stressed that the Saeima should not ratify the proposed variant of the boundary treaty with Russia unless it suggested changes according to the border delineation confirmed in the Latvian-Russian peace treaty of August 11, 1920. In Russia, these recommendations were considered to be an official decision to revisit the territorial claims on the part of Latvia [17]. As a result, the negotiations on the boundary treaty between Russia and Latvia were broken off. However, the Russian party intensified the boundary treaty negotiations with Estonia. When commenting on this decision, the Russian leader, Putin stressed that the boundary treaty with Estonia had been signed and it had been a conscious decision regardless of possible demarches of any Baltic politicians. He also emphasised that Russia would never engage in negotiations on any territorial claims [18]. However, the problem of the Russian-Estonian border was not resolved in 2005: during its ratification, the Estonian parliament introduced amendments to the text similar to those proposed by the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Latvian Saeima. In response, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lavrov renounced his signature on the treaty with Estonia [19].

In February 2006, the Latvian Saeima made an official decision not to follow the recommendations of the Foreign Affairs Commission and instructed the cabinet to sign the boundary treaty with Russia without mentioning changes to the boundary delineation. The proposition of radical Latvian politicians from the For Fatherland and Freedom party to adopt simultaneously a bill on acknowledging the 1920 treaty as legally valid was supported by 9 out of 86 members of the Saeima. The negotiations on the boundary treaty between Russia and Latvia were resumed; the boundary treaty was signed and ratified.

When commenting on the ratification of the boundary treaty with Latvia, the Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Titov expressed his hope that the treaty would have a 'sobering' effect on Estonia [20]. It is another case of the influence of the regional approach on the position of those responsible for Russian foreign policy towards the Baltic States: the actions of one of the Baltic States aspiring to cooperation with Russia are set up as an example to other Baltic States that do not show such aspiration. However, no attempt is made to establish the actions of the Baltic States as an example to states from other regions. For example, Latvian aspirations to cooperate are not held up as an example to Japan, which could also withdraw its territorial claims to Russia. Unlike European Estonia and Latvia, Japan is part of a different region — Asia. Therefore, the Russian elite do not deem it possible to consider Russian-Latvian and Russia-Japanese relations as analogous. As to Estonia, in April 2007, when the Latvian parliament discussed the ratification of the boundary treaty with Russia, the Russian-speaking residents of the Estonian capital took to the streets in protest against the decision of the Estonian authorities to relocate the monument to the Soviet liberators from the centre

of Tallinn [21]. These events — already out of the context of the regional approach — postponed the resolution of the boundary issue with Estonia. The boundary treaty remained unsigned. The attempts to resume negotiations [22] made at the end of 2012/beginning of 2013 yielded no result.

Another contentious issue in modern Russian-Estonian relations is the rights of the Russian-speaking population of Estonia. Out of millions of Russian compatriots living abroad, Estonia is home to at least half a million. Again, when compared with the rights of the Russian-speaking population in the Central Asiatic republics of the former USSR, for instance, Turkmenistan, the situation does not seem to be catastrophic. However, it is a focus of careful attention and concern in Russia [23]. One of the factors behind it is the regional approach. Unlike Turkmenistan, which is considered by the Russian elite to be part of either the post-Soviet space or Asia, the attitude towards Estonia that has formed over the decades since the collapse of the USSR suggests that it is indeed a European country.

Thus, when assessing the situation regarding the rights of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia, Russian politicians assess this situation in comparison not to the countries of the post-Soviet space, the more so Asia, but to those of Europe, in most of which the developments that take place in Estonia are impossible. It is the situation in Estonia that the Russian President, Putin referred to when he refused to put up with the fact that Russian population did not fully enjoy the rights granted to everyone residing in the European continent [24]. This is another aspect of the effect of the regional approach on the current policy of the Russian Federation towards the Republic of Estonia: if the latter were part of the post-Soviet space, the problem of observing the rights of the Russian population in the country would be less sensitive for the Russian elite. However, in Estonia, being part of Europe, such a situation is inadmissible.

Conclusion

The regional approach plays a significant role in the interaction between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Estonia. This article considers only the position of Russia on resolving the boundary issue with Estonia, as well as the protection of the right of compatriots in the country.

The boundary issues between Russia and Estonia also depend on the context of Russian policy towards resolving a similar problem with the other Baltic States. As the article shows, the deterioration of Russian-Latvian relations concerning this issue resulted in the improvement of relations with Estonia. In the same way, problems with Estonia resulted in better relations with Latvia.

In the case of the protection of the rights of compatriots in Estonia, certain pressure is exerted by the general context of Russian policy towards Europe. Today, the Russian leaders consider Estonia and the other Baltic States as European states rather than countries of the post-Soviet space. As a result, the human rights standards applied in Estonia are estimated not from the perspective of those typical of the post-Soviet space, but from that of the European perspective, which the situation in Estonia does not live up to.

The study into these two cases does not only make it possible to corroborate the effect of the regional approach on Russian policy towards Estonia

but also supports the general theoretical conclusion that it has a significant role on the formation of the views of the political elite on the foreign policy of the state in general.

Indeed, the transformation of Russian leaders' attitude towards Estonia is not merely a consequence of the reciprocal changes in Estonian policy towards Russia and the changes in Estonian home politics negatively affecting the situation of the Russian-speaking population in the country, but also a result of the changes in the perception of certain regions, namely, the group of countries that includes Estonia. So, the oscillations in the Russian-Baltic interaction, as well as in Russian policy towards Europe inevitably affect the political connections with Estonia.

It is of interest that the effect of the regional approach on foreign policy is more pronounced in the case of major powers rather than with smaller states. So, Estonian foreign policy towards Russia does not depend on the regional approach. Russia is such an important factor in Estonian foreign policy that any actions of the Russian leadership in the field of both foreign and home policy are carefully assessed (and mostly criticised) by the Estonian leadership regardless of the events taking place in other countries, including the post-Soviet space. At the same time, one can assume that the ideas of Estonian leaders about, for instance, the Middle Eastern states are subject to the regional approach. However, the substantiation of this hypothesis would require a comprehensive study into the political views of Estonian leaders, including their operational codes.

References

1. *Koncepcija vneshnej politiki Rossijskoj Federacii* [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation], 2000, 28 June.
2. *Koncepcija vneshnej politiki Rossijskoj Federacii* [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation], 2008, 12 July.
3. *Koncepcija vneshnej politiki Rossijskoj Federacii* [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation], 2013, 12 February.
4. Lanko, D. A. *Regional'nyj podhod v formirovanii vneshnej politiki i prinjatii vneshnepoliticheskikh reshenij: sravnitel'nyj analiz rossijskogo i amerikanskogo opyta* [The regional approach in the formulation of foreign policy and foreign policy decisions: a comparative analysis of Russian and American experience], 2011, Saint Petersburg, Levsha, 400 p.
5. Blondel, J. 1992, *Politicheskoe liderstvo: pust' k vseobemljushhemu analizu* [Political Leadership: Towards a General Analysis], Moscow, Rossijskaja akademija upravlenija [Russian Academy of Management], 135 p.
6. Leites, N. C. 1951, *The Operational Code of the Politburo*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 100 p.
7. Walker, S. G., Malici, A., Schafer, M. (eds.) 2011, *Rethinking Foreign Policy Analysis: States, Leaders, and the Microfoundations of Behavioural International Relations*, New York and London, Routledge, 322 p.
8. Mearsheimer, J. J., Walt, S. M. 2007, *The Israel Lobby and U. S. Foreign Policy*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 496 p.
9. Renshon, J. 2008, Stability and Change in Belief Systems: The Operational Code of George W. Bush, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 52, no. 6, December, p. 820—849.

10. Bush, G. W. 2004, *President's News Conference with Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom*, Istanbul, Turkey, June 28.

11. Dyson, S. B. 2001, Drawing Policy Implications from the 'Operational Code' of a 'New' Political Actor: Russian President Vladimir Putin, *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 34, no. 3/4, p. 329—346.

12. Lavrov, S. V. 2013, Interview of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia S. Lavrov for the BBC, Moscow, March 7.

13. Rossiija i Pribaltika: doklad Soveta po vneshnej i oboronnoj politike [Russia and the Baltic States: Report of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy], 1997, *Nezavisimaja gazeta* [The Independent newspaper], October 28.

14. Rossiija i Pribaltika II: doklad Soveta po vneshnej i oboronnoj politike [Russia and the Baltic II: Report of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy], 1999, *Nezavisimaja gazeta* [The Independent newspaper], October 13.

15. Laar, M., Valk, H., Vahtre, L. 1992, *Ocherki istorii jestonskogo naroda* [Essays in the History of the Estonian people], Tallinn, Cupar, 234 p.

16. Taagepera, R. 2002, Baltic Values and Corruption in Comparative Context, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 3 (Fall), p. 243—258.

17. Sejm Latvii predjavljaet territorial'nye pretenzii k Rossii [Saeima has territorial claims to Russia], 2005, News agency *Regnum*, 19 January.

18. Putin, V. V. Stenograficheskiy otchet o vstreche s tvorcheskim kollektivom gazety «Komsomol'skaja pravda» [Transcript of the meeting with the creative team of the newspaper "Komsomolskaya Pravda"], 2005, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 23 May.

19. Mezhevich, N. M. 2007, Rossijsko-estonskaja granica: istorija formirovaniija i sovremennoe znachenie dlja razvitiija Severo-Zapada Rossii [Russian-Estonian border: the history of the formation and contemporary significance for the development of the North-West Russia], *Pskovskij regionologicheskij zhurnal*, no. 4, p. 134—145.

20. Pograničnyj dogovor s Latviej ratificirovan [Border agreement with Latvia ratified], 2007, *Segodnya* [Today], September 5, 15:07.

21. Lanko, D. A. 2009, Populizm i političeskoe učasťie: uličnye besporjadki v stranah Baltijskogo regiona v 2007—2009 gg. [Populism and political participation: the riots in the Baltic Sea region in 2007—2009], *Politicheskaja ekspertiza: POLITEKS* [Political Expertise: POLITEKS], T. 5, no. 2, p. 209—230.

22. Tüür, K. 2012, Russia and Estonia, In: Tüür, K., Morozov, V. (eds.) *Russian Federation 2012: Short-Term Prognosis*, Tartu, Tartu University Press, p. 123—126.

23. Dolgov, K. K. 2012, Kommentarij Upolnomochennogo MID Rossii po voprosam prav čeloveka, demokratii i verhovenstva prava K. K. Dolgova v svjazii s reklamnoj publikaciej v jestonskom izdaniij «Eesti Ekspress» [Russian Foreign Ministry Commissioner's comments on human rights, democracy and the rule of law K. K. Dolgova in connection with the publication of the advertisement in the Estonian edition «Eesti Ekspress»], *Informacionnye materialy Ministerstva inostrannyh del Rossijskoj Federacii* [Information materials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation], September 7.

24. Putin, V. V. 2005, *Sovmestnaja press-konferencija s Predsedatelem Palestinskoj nacional'noj administracii Mahmudom Abbasom* [Joint press conference with the President of the Palestinian National Authority Mahmoud Abbas], Ramallah, Israel, April 29.

About the author

Dr Dmitry Lanko, Associate Professor, Department of European Studies, School of International Relations, Saint Petersburg State University, Russia.

E-mail: dimppa@hotmail.com