

THE BALTIC POLICY  
OF GERMANY  
AND CURRENT  
INTERNATIONAL  
RELATIONS

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*This article analyses the Baltic policy of united Germany from the 1990s until today. The authors set out to identify the significance of German-Baltic relations and the role of the Eastern policy in Russian-German relations. The method of dynamic comparison between the political and economic narrative in intergovernmental relations makes it possible to identify distinctive features of Germany's Baltic policy in the context of current international relations. In particular, it is noted that Germany was most active in the Baltic region in the 1990s, when the country was establishing political, economic, and cultural ties with the new independent states. In the second half of the 1990s, Germany's foreign policy became less intense. After the accession of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to the EU and NATO in 2004, certain disagreements started to arise between Germany and the Baltics. It explains the lukewarm relations between them. The Ukraine events brought about a change in Germany's regional policy. Despite Russia remaining one of the key economic and political counteractors, Germany, being a partner of the Baltics in the EU and NATO, cannot adopt a neutral position in the conflict of interests between the Baltics and Russia.*

*Key words:* Germany's foreign policy, Baltics, EU, NATO, Nord Stream, Baltic Sea region, Russia

The history of relations between the unified Germany and the three Baltic States — the topic of this article — begins in August 28, 1991. On this day, several days after the recognition of the independence of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia by the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the three Baltic countries were recognised as independent states by Germany and the four countries established official diplomatic relations. In the first years after their gaining independence, the Baltics' go-

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vernment circles expected two possible models to be used by Germany in the region. On the one hand, there were concerns about the resumption of the *Drang nach Osten* policy. On the other hand, Germany was seen by many as a natural counterweight to Russia, an ‘advocate of the Balts’<sup>1</sup> defending the interests of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia both in the West and the East. The German presence in the Baltics was viewed by the Baltics’ government circles as a tool to overcome dependence on Russia and forge strong military, economic, and political ties with the West. [1, S. 21—22] The reality was different.

Until the early 1990s, Germany’s policy towards the Baltics was rather moderate. The German government’s careful official attitude towards Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia was explained by the disinclination to weaken the position of President Gorbachev in the USSR, which could have postponed or even terminated the process of Germany’s reunification. [4, S. 137] After the reunification of Germany and the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were seemingly no reasons for the German Federative Republic to refrain from activities in the Baltics.

In 1991—1992, relations between the Baltic States and Germany were rapidly developing. Several weeks after the establishment of official diplomatic contacts, ambassadors were sent to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Germany’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who arrived in Estonia on September 11, 1991, was the first top European politician to pay an official visit to the Baltics after independence. During his visit, H-D. Genscher reassured the Baltic leadership that the German government was interested in developing relations with Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia and would facilitate the return of the Baltics into the international community. H-D. Genscher also declared Germany’s commitment to support a convergence between the Baltics and the EU. [6, S. 67] H-D. Genscher’s words were backed by actions: Germany played an active role in the Baltics’ accession to the CSCE, Council of Europe, Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, and the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS).

Alongside facilitating the integration of the Baltics into the Western institutions, Germany provided different types of assistance to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. In 1992-1994, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs allocated DM 30 million to the Baltics for the construction of a border control system [7, S. 101] and DM 125 million within the transformation programme. [8, S. 174] As to military cooperation, the Baltics received assistance in personnel training. Material assistance was insignificant and very selective. In 1992, the Baltic armed forces received communications equipment, medical supplies, trucks, and mine detectors from the warehouses of the former People’s Army of the GDR. A very limited number of weapons were supplied in order not to provoke Russia. [12, S. 474] Cooperation in

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<sup>1</sup> Apparently, the phrase *Anwalt der Balten* (the advocate of the Balts) was coined by Hans-Dieter Lucas and it appeared in the media in 1993. It was often used by the German Ministers of Foreign Affairs H-D.Genscher and K.Kinkel. Germans interpreted their role of the ‘advocate of the Balts’ as readiness to facilitate the integration of the Baltics into the western institutions. [9, p. 197]

science and culture was rapidly developing between the FRG and the Baltics. In the early 1990s, German research foundations and academic organisations opened offices in the Baltics. These were DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), DFG (German Research Society), the Goethe Institute, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, etc. [9, p. 163] As to the economy, in 1991—1993, Germany focused on assisting the Baltics in privatisation and increasing economic competitiveness. Assistance was provided in the form of trainings for administrative staff and financial support programmes. In the framework of the so-called Technical Cooperation and Mutual Assistance Programme, Germany granted Estonia DM 13 m in 1993 (13 m in 1993), Latvia — DM 13.3 m (13 m in 1993), and Lithuania — DM 14 m (1993, 20.4 m). [9, p. 163]

In their turn, the Baltics did not only strive to adopt German practices in different fields, but they also considered Germany as one of preferable statehood models. Estonia was most successful in adopting German practices. Its administrative, legal, and banking systems were largely based on German practices and expertise. However, this gravitation towards Germany particularly pronounced in the 1990s was gradually fading out. In the early 2000s, the Baltics ceased to consider Germany as a mode for their socio-political development.

Germany's interest in the region was also decreasing. The short post-independence period of active cooperation, when contacts were established in numerous areas, was followed by a pragmatic assessment of relations with the region. From the economic perspective, the Baltics were not very attractive to Germany due to their small size and limited economic potential. From the perspective of sociocultural ties, the region did not have considerable significance, since the German minority — a strong link between Germany and the Baltics before World War II — was not sizeable.

In the mid-1990s, Germany faced a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, the country recognised its historical responsibility for the Baltic States and showed solidarity with them. On the other, relations with Russia took priority over cooperation with the Baltics. As a result, the German-Baltic relations largely depended on Germany's policy towards Russia. More than once, they were tested for compatibility with the 'Russian issue'.

The first test was the withdrawal of Soviet/Russian troops from the Baltics. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia considered the presence of these troops on their territory a threat to their integrity and security. [6, p. 66] However, the Baltics did not have either sufficient funds or political will to interest Russia in withdrawing its troops. As a result, they turned to the West for support. From the perspective of the German leadership, the withdrawal of Russian troops was necessary to ease the tension in the region. Moreover, it was in line with the national interest of Germany, since units of the western Group of Forces remained on its territory. The German government supported Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia demanding that Russia withdraw troops from the Baltics as soon as possible. At the same time, Germany called for the governments of the Baltics to closely cooperate with Russia on security issues. To persuade Moscow to expedite the withdrawal of troops,

Germany and other western countries had to seek compromises. For instance, Latvia and Estonia granted Russia a permission to continue the exploitation of military facilities on their territories until August 31, 1994.

Another critical point in German-Baltic relations was the republics' accession to the EU and NATO. From the very beginning, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia strived for accession to the EU and NATO. The Baltics considered Germany as a key to these organisations. In effect, Germany's position was rather moderate. The country opposed the idea of speedy access of the Baltics to NATO. The official objectives of German foreign policy in the region did not contradict those in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. They suggested support for reforms, guarantees for independence and integrity of the Baltics, and their integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures. [1, S. 166] However, despite the fact that the major interests of Germany and the Baltics coincided, differences in understanding how and when these objectives can be achieved became evident in the early 1990s. [1, S. 216]

At first, the accessions of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to the EU and NATO were discussed separately. The Baltics' priority was their accession to NATO, which they viewed as a guarantee for independence and integrity. The Baltics' governments considered the EU only as an economic association. It soon turned out that Russia did not object to the Baltics' EU membership. However, their NATO membership was regarded as a threat to Russia's security and the country's interests in the region.

NATO enlargement was one of Germany's key priorities in the realm of security. Thus, the Federative Republic showed considerable initiative in this issue. However, for the German government, enlargement meant the accession of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary to NATO. The German leadership believed the Central European states to be more important for the country's security than the three Baltic Republics. Moreover, the potential NATO membership of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary was not a threat to Russian-German partnership. [9, P. 196] The German government did not oppose the accession of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania to NATO. At the same time, it did not insist on accelerating this process. [10, S. 8] Moreover, the Baltic dimension was not the primary focus of Germany's 'eastern policy', which is indicated by the fact that the relations with the Baltics were supervised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs rather than the Chancellor, who was traditionally responsible for bilateral relations with the countries considered as most important for Germany — the US, France, Russia, and some others. The German Minister of Foreign Affairs Klaus Kinkel (1992—1998) identified the Baltics' accession to the EU a key priority for his Ministry. However, even during his time in office, negotiations on the Baltics' NATO membership progressed slowly. Under Helmut Kohl, Germany's foreign policy in the Baltics was rather passive. This trend continued as Gerhard Schroeder assumed office as Chancellor. [9, p. 195] The passivity of Germany's foreign policy towards the Baltics is explained by its subordinate relationship to Germany's more global eastern policy governed by the 'Russia-first' principle. Therefore, Germany's foreign policy in the region was very pragmatic from the start. It was based on the *Realpolitik* paradigm — the Baltics were not to threaten German-Russian relations under any circumstances.

However, after the advocates of NATO enlargement had defeated the proponents of the 'Russia-First' policy in President Clinton's administration in the mid-1990s, the US actively supported the Baltics' NATO ambitions in the first round of enlargement. [2, S. 60] This increased pressure on the German government. As a result, the US nudged Germany into changes in its position on the Baltics' NATO membership. At the same time, the government of the Federative Republic supported the idea of synchronising the EU and NATO enlargement processes. Germany's leadership believed that parallel enlargement would appease Russia (which opposed the enlargement of the Alliance) and accelerate European cooperation in foreign policy and security. Factors that expedited the decision about the Baltics' accession to NATO were both the softening of Russia's position and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which forced Russia and the US to cooperate more closely in the fight against terrorism and compelled NATO to revise its strategy towards enlargement. Germany's position was also affected by the dramatic events in the Balkans. As the civil war in Yugoslavia raged on, Gerhard Schroeder's government felt obliged to take measures to ensure stability in the Baltics, where ethnic conflict potential was also rather high.

A dramatic change in Germany's position on the Baltic's accession to NATO occurred in April 2002, when the Bundestag opposition seized the initiative and demanded that the government support the accession of the Baltics to NATO at the Alliance's conference in Prague. [1, S. 275] Several days later, the German government declared its support for the enlargement. At the Prague summit in November 2002, the Baltic Republics were officially invited to the accession talks. An important security objective of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia was almost attained and the major differences in the Baltic-German relations were technically resolved.

After the Baltics' accession to NATO in March 2004 and the EU in May 2004, the relations between Germany and the Baltic States reached a new level — they became equal partners in Euro-Atlantic organisations. However, this fact seemed to discourage cooperation between the Baltics and Germany even further, since their interests within the mentioned organisations were diverging. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are fairly satisfied with their current participation in the European institution and they are not interested in further European integration, which is supported by Germany.

In the 2000s, the German-Baltic relations deteriorated against the backdrop of the project launched by the Russian-German company Nord-Stream to construct a natural gas pipeline, which was designed to secure supply of Russian gas to German and European consumers. The Baltics viewed the construction of the Nord Stream a threat to their security. Thus, the project faced stiff opposition from the Baltics at the preparation stage. Baltic politicians regularly complained that their position was ignored by Russia and Germany. They even compared the pipeline construction project with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, hinting at another 'division' of the Baltics between Russia and Germany. [6, P. 72] The most active position was taken by Estonia, which refused to admit the chair of the Nord Stream's board of directors, ex-Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, and to discuss Finland's recom-

mendations concerning the pipeline route running through the Estonian economic zone of the Gulf of Finland. In September of the same year, the Estonian Party did not allow the Nord Stream to explore the country's section of the seafloor. [13] Nevertheless, despite the opposition of the Baltics, the pipeline was built and put into operation on November 8, 2011.

Although Germany played a key role on the Baltics' international relations, the fixation of the latter on trans-Atlantic relations and differences over the taxation policy suggest that Germany and the Baltics have not forged a close political partnership. [1, S. 23] The relations between the Baltics and Russia, with which Germany developed mutually beneficial relation, were also complicated. The confrontation between the Baltics and Russia puts Germany in a difficult situation, since, on the one hand, it cannot ignore the interests of its NATO and EU partners, on the other, the country is interested in maintaining and improving relations with Russia. However, the tragic events that took place in Ukraine in February 2014 and Russia's incorporation of Crimea had an adverse effect on the relations between Russia and the West. Germany's political elite was increasingly supportive of the Baltics in the Russian-Baltic confrontation. In March 2015, during his visit to Tallinn, Germany's Minister of Foreign Affairs Frank-Walter Steinmeier stressed that the Baltics could rely on NATO and the EU (<http://www.ves.lv/rus/politika/glava-mid-germanii-strany-baltii-mogut-polozhitsya-na-nato-i-es/>). It seems that under pressure from its NATO allies, Germany was forced to provide considerable assistance to the NATO members from Central and Eastern Europe, including the Baltics. [14] According to the article published in the *Spiegel* in March 2105, Germany plans to make available six aircraft for a strengthened air-patrolling mission. [15] In a short- and mid-term perspective, Germany's policy in the Baltic Sea region will be coordinated with its NATO and EU partners more carefully than before the Ukraine events. It means that in the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Baltic dimension receives stronger support than the pro-Russian one.

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