

THE 1934 TREATY OF THE BALTIC ENTENTE: PERSPECTIVES FOR UNDERSTANDING

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Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania signed the Treaty of Understanding and Cooperation in Geneva on 12 September 1934. The treaty prescribed regular meetings at the level of foreign ministers. Over the course of six years (1934–40), eleven trilateral meetings of foreign ministers took place. At these, political issues of common interest were discussed and, as a rule, opinions on international negotiations and prospective treaties as well as joint positions under the League of Nations were coordinated. The conclusion of the treaty was a starting point for further collaboration between the official institutions of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In addition, meetings of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (those of journalists, lawyers, economists, university students, teachers, trade institutions, local governments, firemen, etc.) of the three countries, as well as joint art exhibitions and sports competitions (so-called Baltic Weeks), were held on a regular basis in the 1930s. The activities of the NGOs were supported by the governments of the Baltic states. “The need for close cooperation between the Baltic states is the cornerstone of our foreign policy,” was stated in the review of the activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia in 1934.¹

The treaty itself and the tight collaboration in the 1930s confirmed the image of Baltic unity in the eyes of outsiders. In the cataclysmic years of 1939–40, it therefore appeared to the big countries in Europe (United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Soviet Union) rather natural that the destiny of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania would be determined by some common settlement. The Baltic states were seen as joint players, especially when guarantees for their integrity were discussed during the meetings between the United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union in the summer of 1939. After the Soviet annexation, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania continued to be perceived (even in Moscow) as a unified political, economic, or cultural entity within the Soviet Union, not to mention the relatively close

¹ *Valitsusasutiste tegevus 1918–34. Välisministeerium* (Tallinn: Riigikantselei, Riigi Trükikoda, 1934), 282.

cooperation between refugees from these countries in exile.² Emphasizing Baltic unity was an important political factor in the Cold War context. Those who publicly expressed their doubts about the existence of a united Baltic region were very few.³

When we look at the topic from the point of view of international relations, the Baltic Entente was not at all as effective as described above. What is most important, and what we should not to forget, is that the Baltic Entente is normally not ranked among defence pacts, although in some cases it has been.⁴ In this regard, it is not unequivocally clear what military alliance means in the first place. If we evaluate the Baltic Entente on the basis of an ambiguous definition such as “arrangements for security cooperation among states”, it may be asserted that the Baltic Entente was indeed expected to enhance security in the 1930s, and the option of a military alliance was also considered in the negotiations of 1933–34. However, if we define the concept of a military alliance in more detail, as actual military cooperation between the states, the Baltic Entente would fall outside that category.⁵ In the second half of the 1930s, the upgrading of the Baltic Entente into a military pact remained a purely theoretical option rather than one of practical politics. The same issue has been thoroughly analyzed by several historians. In Soviet historiography, the Baltic Entente was regarded as an example of foreign policy that was hostile towards the Soviet Union,⁶ or even as being in the service of German imperialism.⁷ After the

² *Regional identity under Soviet rule: the case of the Baltic states*, ed. by Dietrich André Loeber, Vytas Stanley Vardys, Laurence Patrick, Anthony Kitching (Hackettstown, NJ: Ass. for the Advancement of Baltic Studies, 1990).

³ Hain Rebas, “Baltic Regionalism?” *Regional identity under Soviet rule: the case of the Baltic states*, ed. by Dietrich André Loeber, Vytas Stanley Vardys, Laurence Patrick, Anthony Kitching (Hackettstown, NJ: Ass. for the Advancement of Baltic Studies, 1990), 413–428.

⁴ “Baltic Entente”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/50936/Baltic-Entente>> (15.6.2012).

⁵ Stefan Bergsmann, “The concept of military alliance”, *Small states and alliances*, ed. by Erich Reiter and Heinz Gärtner (Heidelberg, New York: Physica-Verlag, 2001), 25–37.

⁶ Heino Arumäe, *Kahe ilma piiril: võitlusest Balti riikide julgeoleku ümber 1933. 1935. ja 1939. aastal* (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1979); Heino Arumäe, *At the crossroads: the foreign policy of the Republic of Estonia in 1933–1939* (Tallinn: Perioodika, Ühiselu, 1983); Heino Arumäe, *Võitlus Balti liidu loomise ümber, 1919–1925* (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1983).

⁷ Madis Pesti, *Rahvuslik reetmine “rahvusluse” sildi all: kodanliku Eesti välispoliitika aastail 1934–1940* (Tallinn: Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus, 1960); Peeter Vihalem, *Eesti kodanluse üleminek saksa fašismi teenistusse* (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1971); Ilo Sildmäe, *Fašistlik eesti kodanlus imperialistliku agressiooni teenistuses Nõukogudevastase sõja ettevalmistamisel (1934–1940)* (Tallinn: Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus, 1954); *Eesti riik ja rahvas II maailmasõjas, XI–XV* (Tallinn: Kommunist, ajaleht “Kodumaa”, 1964–72).

regaining of independence, the circumstances relating to the establishment and subsequent activity of the Baltic Entente have been analyzed by Latvian historians.⁸

This article studies the different explanations that have been used to generalize the essence of the Baltic alliance and to characterize the cooperation between the countries around the Baltic Sea. The differences lie primarily in emphases when answering questions like the following: To what extent and by what arguments have Estonia's, Latvia's, and Lithuania's belonging to some independent, united entity been justified? Do we have any grounds for talking about generally recognized, understandable-to-all characteristics that are common to the Baltic states?

Small states and major powers

Trying to answer questions like that, I will limit the analysis to one approach in this article. The most common is the way of explanation that proceeds from national interests – what I call a traditional explanation in this article. The objective is not to recapitulate all lines of thought in international relations, not even in terms of how they have specifically assessed the role of the Baltic states in international relations. As a rule, general theoretical studies, textbooks, manuals and other publications dealing with the schools of thought in the field of international relations make no case of the Baltic states whatsoever.⁹ Nevertheless, numerous articles and article collections can be found that are devoted either specifically to the Baltic states or the issues of the Baltic Sea region, though primarily following the regaining of independence.¹⁰

Occasionally, one can find in such publications attempts to generalize the experience of small states in international relations based on the example of the Baltic states. For instance, a collection compiled by Olaf F. Knudsen mentions two theories that enable the explanation of the problems

⁸ Inesis Feldmanis, Aivars Stranga, *The destiny of the Baltic Entente 1934–1940* (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 1994).

⁹ *Small states in world politics: explaining foreign policy behavior*, ed. by Jeanne A. K. Hey (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003); *The role of small states in the European Union*, ed. by Baldur Thorhallsson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

¹⁰ *The Baltic states and their region: new Europe or old?*, ed. by David J. Smith (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2005); *Bordering Russia: theory and prospects for Europe's Baltic rim*, ed. by Hans Moutitzen (Aldershot; Brookfield, USA: Ashgate, 1998); *The Baltic Sea region: conflict or cooperation? Region-making, security, disarmament and conversion: proceedings of the TAPRI-PFK-workshop, Kiel, 6–8 December 1991*, ed. by Christian Wellmann (Münster, Hamburg: LIT Verlag, 1992).

between big and small states in the Baltic Sea region. According to him, these are, firstly, the way of explanation proceeding from the correlation of forces between (big) states and, secondly, one based on the theory of imperialism.¹¹ In the present article I would rank both of the approaches (big and small states, and imperialism) among the traditional explanations. In fact, the majority of researchers who focus on propounding the specific role of small states in international relations may be regarded as representatives of the traditional way. The distinction between a big and a small state is always connected with the context and is therefore flexible and relative.¹² Nevertheless, one might highlight some features that provide a basis for discriminating the behaviour of small states from that of major powers in international relations.¹³

The creation of the Baltic Entente in 1934 as internal (Baltic) policy

As mentioned above, within the confines of the traditional way of explanation, the conclusion of the Baltic pact in 1934 can be explained from various perspectives. First, there were domestic policy reasons. In view of these, we may simplify the question and formally treat the Baltic Entente as an agreement between three presidents wielding authoritarian power. Chronologically, an explanation to the effect that the alliance emerged only thanks to authoritarian regimes would fit in well. Beginning in at least 1917, representatives of various parties of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania declared that their foreign policy objective was a maximally close cooperation between the Baltic states. The same was reiterated by the various government coalitions throughout the 1920s, especially in Estonia and Latvia. Yet the establishment of the Baltic Entente was not accomplished until the termination of parliamentary and political parties in Estonia and Latvia in the spring of 1934.

The impetus for official negotiations between the three countries came from a Lithuanian memorandum to Estonia and Latvia 25 April 1934, in

¹¹ *Stability and security in the Baltic Sea region: Russian, Nordic and European aspects*, ed. by Olav F. Knudsen (London, Portland: Frank Cass, 1999), 5.

¹² *Small states inside and outside the European Union: interests and policies*, ed. by Laurent Goetschel (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1998); *Small states and the security challenge in the new Europe*, ed. by Werner Bauwens, Armand Clesse and Olav F. Knudsen (London, Washington: Brassey's, 1996); *Small states in Europe and dependence*, ed. by Otmar Höll (Wien: W. Braumüller; Laxenburg, Austria: Austrian Institute for International Affairs, 1983).

¹³ John Rogers, "The foreign policy of small states: Sweden and the Mosul Crisis, 1924–1925", *Contemporary European History*, 16:3 (2007), 349–369.

which a proposal for closer cooperation was made. The Estonian envoy in Kaunas, Johan Leppik, confirmed that he had information to assume that the memorandum represented “the product of the considerations of the Lithuanian president, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to reckon with.”¹⁴ By this, the president wanted to calm the opposition, which had criticized Lithuania’s foreign policy pursued until then. According to the envoy’s information, the subject of the Baltic alliance provided an opportunity for the Lithuanian opposition to express itself. The opposition’s main claim was that Lithuania was exposed to the risk of isolation, which should be avoided. In July 1934, Leppik unequivocally stated that Lithuania’s appeal to the Baltic states was a forced step for the president in the face of growing pressure from the opposition. According to the Estonian envoy in Riga, Karl Menning, Latvian president Ulmanis lacked any interest in foreign policy. However, both he and Estonian President Päts were obviously interested in controlling the events. The three presidents were evidently interested in giving the impression that they were concerned about the security of their state and wanted to take into account the public opinion during spring and summer 1934.

But it is hardly likely that Päts, Ulmanis, and Smetana were fascinated by the plan of Ants Piip, a leading foreign policy figure, foreign minister, and envoy of Estonia in the period between the two world wars, which he propagated in Riga in 1933–34.¹⁵ Piip had been a foreign minister in the 1920s, he represented Estonia as an envoy in London (1918–19) and Washington (1923–25). The generalization that the establishment of the Baltic Entente in 1934 represented the realization of an old and obscure dream, mainly in the heads of the politicians of the Baltic states, may conditionally be considered as a domestic policy.¹⁶ Attempts to build a Baltic union were based on the idea of Balto-Scandinavian regional cooperation proposed in the days during and after the First World War, and were consistent with different plans in Europe that had been put forward after the war to stabilize the new international situation.¹⁷ Such plans were presented at

¹⁴ Leppik to the deputy of foreign minister, Estonian State Archives [Riigiarhiiv, henceforth ERA], f. 957, n. 13, s. 797.

¹⁵ Eero Medijainen, *Eesti välispoliitika Balti suund 1926–1934* (Tartu Ülikool, 1991), 38–43.

¹⁶ Kaido Jaanson, “The Baltic Sea region in international relations of the twentieth century: the seminal nature of the interwar period”, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 32:3 (2001), 267–288; Kaido Jaanson, “Põhjavaaligus või fatamorgana? Balti-Skandinaavia liidu idee ja koostöö ühest suurest sõjast teiseni”, *Akadeemia*, 9 (1990), 1894–1904.

¹⁷ Marko Lehti, *A Baltic league as a construct of the new Europe: envisioning a Baltic region and small state sovereignty in the aftermath of the First World War* (Frankfurt am Main, New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

several levels from 1917–18. Future cooperation was to resemble that of the British Commonwealth.¹⁸ This could embrace Estonia and Latvia or Estonia, Latvia, and Finland, or even all the countries around the Baltic Sea (except Germany and Soviet Union). It envisaged already in 1918 that the Estonian-Latvian-Lithuanian alliance should be led by a joint cabinet to be composed of the governments of the federal states.

Estonia had been the most active proponent of the Baltic collaboration since achieving independence. This was noticed even by uncommitted observers. For example, the envoy of the United States in the Baltic states, Frederik Coleman, reported on 22 April 1929 to Washington: “Estonian’s geographic situation makes her the most exposed of the three Baltic States to a sudden attack by Soviet Russia. Her exposed position has naturally played an important part in shaping her foreign policy. Like Latvia, Estonia was strongly in favour of a Baltic League in the early days of her existence as an independent state.” By characterizing the role of other neighboring states, he continued: “Lithuania has pursued a policy of complete aloofness from the other two Baltic States [...]; Finland is clearly more interested in developing good relations with the Scandinavian countries than with Estonia.”¹⁹

The decisive turn for the creation of Entente was connected to the changes in the leadership of Lithuanian foreign policy. At least two young officials started to play important roles in Lithuania in the 1930s. They were foreign minister Stasys Lozoraitis, and colonel Stasys Raštikis, who in 1934 was appointed chief of the general staff. Raštikis repeatedly took the initiative in promoting a Baltic military alliance, but the Estonian military command remained modest in this direction. All attempts to improve the Lithuanian situation remained unrealized – or as Vytautas Žalys put it, the Lithuania geopolitical position was the same at the end of the 1930s as in previous years. To the south Lithuania had no real relations with Poland; in the north was the moribund Baltic Entente.²⁰

However, can Baltic identity be correlated with some territorial awareness or collective consciousness? Does it represent a territorial togetherness

¹⁸ Eero Medijainen, “Ants Piip Eesti kohast rahvusvahelistes liitudes”, *Kleio*, 9 (1994), 37–41.

¹⁹ F. W. B. Coleman to the Secretary of State, 22 April 1929, National Archives (US) [henceforth NA], College Park, RG 59, 760n.61/32.

²⁰ Vytautas Žalys, “The return of Lithuania to the European stage”, Alfonsas Eidintas, Vytautas Žalys, *Lithuania in European politics: the years the first republic, 1918–1940*, introduction and afterword by Alfred Erich Senn, ed. by Edvardas Tuskenis (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 151–154.

perceived by the people living in the Baltic states, and how can such a perception be determined and defined? Identity can be specified in two ways, the most important of which is the distinction between “us and them”. We can distinguish internal identity and external identity (identity imposed by others). In the case of the Baltic states, the so-called internal common denominator, or “us”, seems to be quite clear in the twentieth century. The gaining of independence and the recognitions by other states occurred more or less simultaneously between 1917–22, and the official Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian delegations worked in close conjunction at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, as they had a similar status and common goals. At the Paris Peace Conference, the issues of the Baltic states were discussed in a joint committee, although often in the context of the whole of Eastern Europe and Russia. The older European countries granted their official *de jure* recognition of the Baltic states after the latter had concluded peace treaties with Russia in 1920. Nevertheless, the ranking of Lithuania as a Baltic state following World War I was not very common; formal United States documents used the term “Lithuania and the Baltic provinces of Russia”.²¹

At the same time, one cannot confirm that the unity between the Baltic states emerged during these simultaneous fights for their independence and for recognition by the great powers in Europe and the United States. There are in-depth analyses of the problems related to the granting of recognition to the Baltic states by Finland and the Scandinavian countries. But those recognitions were given separately to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and not commonly to the Baltic states. Similarly, the most voluminous research to date on the issue of the United States *de jure* is a monograph published in 1965 by Albert N. Tarulis, a scholar of Lithuanian extraction.²² He primarily portrays the internal pressure exerted on the State Department by the so-called Baltic people using various levers and levels for the purpose of obtaining recognition and the right to designate diplomatic and consular representatives. On the contrary to Tarulis, Constantine R. Jurgela approached to the same topic as a special Lithuanian case study.²³ He estimated highly the pressure placed on United States president Harding by the Lithuanian-American community, but seems to

²¹ *Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, 1911*, vol. II (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, United States Department of State, 1919), 666–674.

²² Albert N. Tarulis, *American-Baltic relations, 1918–1922: the struggle over recognition* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1965).

²³ Constantine R. Jurgela, *Lithuania and the United States: the establishment of state relations* (Chicago: Lithuanian Historical Society, The Lithuanian Research and Studies Center, 1985).

avoid the fact that recognition was given simultaneously to all three Baltic states. He and Alfonsas Eidintas pointed out the role of different Lithuanian émigré institutions and their activity in achieving the recognition for Lithuania in 1922.²⁴

From the point of view of Lithuania, it was understandable that they wanted to depict the process of receiving independence as a restoration of the old, historical statehood. Lithuanian political leaders believed that Lithuania had ancient state traditions, and the status of Lithuania differed from Estonia and Latvia under international law. Estonia and Latvia were new states that based their status mainly on the comparatively new principle of national self-determination. Some political leaders believed that Lithuania could retain its independence when Russia sooner or later sought to regain a Baltic window through Estonia and Latvia.²⁵ Ironically, the *de jure* recognition of Latvia and Estonia by the European powers more than a year before Lithuania's recognition, and simultaneous *de jure* recognition by the United States in 1922, proved that this was a baseless hope.

The agreement on political cooperation concluded in Warsaw in April 1922 (Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Finland) was not ratified by Finland.²⁶ By the end of 1923, only the Estonian-Latvian defence pact was formalized, yet subsequently only minimal efforts were made to actually implement it. The main result of the economic cooperation efforts was the Estonian-Latvian customs union agreement, concluded also in 1923, which soon was reduced to bilateral trade agreements. In these, the so-called Baltic reservation was used in the trade treaties of the Baltic states until the 1930s. In principle, this allowed mutual fringe benefits, yet in practice minimal use was made of this opportunity. The critical impetus to realize the Baltic Entente came from outside these countries and was first and foremost related to the signing of the non-aggression pact between Poland and Germany on 26 January 1934.

²⁴ Alfonsas Eidintas, *Lithuanian emigration to the United States 1868–1950* (Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos institutas, 2003), 115–146.

²⁵ Vytautas Žalys, "The Era of Ultimatums", Alfonsas Eidintas, Vytautas Žalys, *Lithuania in European politics: the years the first republic, 1918–1940*, introduction and afterword by Alfred Erich Senn, ed. by Edvardas Tuskenis (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 100.

²⁶ Heikki Roikko-Jokela, *Ihanteita ja reaalipolitiikkaa: Rudolf Holstin toiminta Baltian maiden kansainvälisen de jure-tunnustamisen ja reunavaltioyhteistyön puolesta 1918–1922*, Studia Historica Jyväskylänensia, 52 (Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän yliopisto, 1995).

Creation of the Baltic Entente from the point of view of international relations

If the emphasis is on the primacy of foreign policy, the establishment of the Baltic Entente can be explained by external factors. Accordingly, the Baltic states became active with the formal warm-up in Polish-German relations in 1933–34. In this particular case, it is not important to address the reasons that prompted the signing of the non-aggression declaration on 26 January 1934. The declaration has been considered a sign of Poland's foreign policy coming to a crossroads, and opinions differ as to its consequences.²⁷ One of the consequences was growing unease in Kaunas and their appeal to northern neighbors Latvia and Estonia.

Apart from the rapprochement between Poland and Germany, however, consideration must be given to even more significant changes. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Estonia Julius Seljamaa notified the envoys in his letter of 16 April 1934 that while the Baltic states were unable to previously undertake any joint actions, now the Soviet Union practically invited them to these. In March 1934 the foreign ministers and top brass of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were requested to visit the Soviet Union at the same time. In the Baltic capitals, the Soviet representatives hinted off the record that Moscow expected friendlier relations and did not even rule out the establishment of Red Army military bases in the Baltic states.²⁸ The establishment of the Baltic Entente materialized after the Soviet Union's leadership (the Politbureau) decided in 1934 to start supporting mutual cooperation between the Baltic states.²⁹ Moscow was interested in establishing a buffer zone between Russia and Germany, and tried to prevent the Baltic states from falling under the influences of Poland or Germany.

Hugh I. Rodgers, who has written a thorough study of the history of the establishment of the Baltic Entente, deemed Estonia and Latvia as losers in international relations as they had developed by August 1934. With Moscow's blessing, however, they came together in Riga and formalized the Baltic Entente agreement. The ceremonial signing of the agreement was

²⁷ Piotr Stefan Wandycz, *The twilight of French eastern alliances, 1926–1936. French-Czechoslovak-Poland relations from Locarno to the remilitarization of the Rhineland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 300–335.

²⁸ Esmo Ridala, "Peajooni Eesti välispoliitikast 1934–1940", *Eesti Teadusliku Seltsi Rootsis Aastaraamat*, Annales VIII, 1977–1979 (Stockholm: Norstedts Tryckeri, 1980), 37–60; Heinrich Laretei, *Saatuse mängukanniks: mällu jäänud märkmeid* (Tallinn: Tallinna Raamatutrükikoda, 1992).

²⁹ Jelena Zubkova, *Baltimaad ja Kreml, 1940–1953* (Tallinn: Varrak, 2007), 21–22.

deferred to the time of the League of Nations assembly in Geneva scheduled for September 1934. According to Rodgers, the agreement was inappropriate for justifying the pious sermons on the unity and solidarity of the Baltics held in the subsequent years. The Baltic states were not completely free by signing the Entente agreement. In his opinion, the agreement of 1934 was even weaker than the so-called Buldur Agreement concluded 14 years previously (a non-ratified treaty, concluded in October 1920 near Riga), and thus the Baltic states emerged from the great diplomatic whirlwind of 1933–34 with nothing gained.³⁰ The same conclusion had been reached by American representatives in the Baltic states by the middle of 1930s. The American minister in Riga, consuls (in Tallinn and Kaunas), and the official staff of legation discussed the recent developments in the Baltic states on 12 June 1937. They agreed with the minister Arthur B. Lane's conclusion that the Baltic Entente seemed to be nothing but a convenient expression without any practical significance.³¹

Broader context of the treaty

When analyzing the context of the conclusion of the Baltic Entente, the attempt to establish a collective security system in Eastern and Central Europe in the first half of the 1930s must be considered a significant external factor. Namely, the Baltic Entente can be treated as an organic part of an even wider political confederacy, which in the history of international relations is known as the Eastern Pact. The Eastern Pact, or the Eastern Locarno Pact, was intended to conclude a mutual assistance agreement between the Soviet Union, France, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland. The reawakening of the old Eastern Pact plan started with the warming of relations between the Soviet Union and France in 1931–32.³² This plan underwent several development stages within a few years. It took into account the principles of the League of Nations and ideas of regional collective security. The Baltic states saw the actual version of the agreement only in the summer of 1934. In the spring and summer of 1934, talks were held about the different textual versions

³⁰ Hugh I. Rodgers, *Search for security: a study in the Baltic diplomacy, 1920–1934* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1975), 102.

³¹ Arthur Bliss Lane to the Secretary of State, 26 June 1937, NA RG 84, Riga, Latvia Legation & Consulate 1937, 127 (610.12).

³² William Ewans Scott, *Alliance against Hitler* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1962).

of the Eastern Pact. One of the major faults of the planned agreement was the uncertainty about the number of the possible participants. Thus, initially France was not even willing to accede to the agreement but rather wanted to take the role of intermediary or guarantor.

One point was clear from the beginning, however. In all the versions of the prospective agreement, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were considered as a unified whole, as the Baltic region or area, the security of which the bigger neighbours were to guarantee. But it was not clear whether Finland belonged to the Baltic states or not, though Helsinki's pursuit was to distance itself in every way possible from the Baltic states and from the Eastern Pact. Therefore the Baltic region needed to be defined in more detail for political and agreement-related purposes. Formally, the Baltic Entente signed in September 1934 was an open agreement – that is, open for other countries to join (although no one planned to do so). The most important outcome of the agreement was that it helped to consolidate the view that politically, in terms of international relations, the Baltic states comprised only Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

In summary, it may be said that pursuant to the traditional way of explanation, the Baltic states developed cooperation between themselves proceeding from practical political considerations. Through such cooperation, they hoped to be more successful in their dealings with bigger states and in international organizations. However, the activity of the Baltic Entente from 1934–40 is ultimately judged a failure, since the pact was unable to enhance the security of its member countries and did not avert their loss of independence. As a rule, practical politics are given as reasons for the failure of the cooperation, including the fact that the persons and departments dealing with the foreign and security policy of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania had differing views on principal dangers and priorities.

Ilmar Tõnisson and evaluation of the Baltic Entente

Fairly widespread in the literature covering the actions of the Baltic Entente is the persistent pursuit to lay the blame for failure of the pact on one or the other party, most often on Estonia. With the shelving of the plans for the Eastern Pact in 1935–36, the major powers of Europe (Germany, France, the Soviet Union) lost interest in utilizing the Baltic Entente for the purposes of the planned pact. Furthermore, it opened the door for disagreements between the Baltic states. Friedrich Akel, who became the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Estonia in 1936, and his successor Karl Selter as well as

the top brass of the Estonian military (J. Laidoner, N. Reek, V. Saarsen, R. Maasing) were considered by their Latvian counterparts to be too friendly to both Poland and Germany. The same has been persistently reiterated by Edgar Anderson, a United States historian of Latvian descent,³³ as well as by those investigating the history of Latvian foreign policy in the 1990s.³⁴ Occasionally there have even been conspiracy speculations to the effect that Estonia deliberately prevented the establishment of a Baltic defence alliance. As proof, the position is presented that a German orientation prevailed in Estonian foreign policy in the 1930s, and since Berlin was not interested in a Baltic defence alliance, it was thwarted with the help of Estonia's pro-German politicians and military officers.³⁵

One of the most influential foreign policy manifestos on the question of the Baltic Entente is deemed to be the writing of Ilmar Tõnisson, son of one of Estonia's best-known politicians Jaan Tõnisson, in the periodical *Akadeemia*, which was published in Tartu and in the context of the "silent era" of the 1930s. The article was issued in 1937 in two editions of the journal.³⁶ In his study, Ilmar Tõnisson denied the unity of Baltic space and destiny. He considered it to be a figment of the imaginations of primarily Latvian politicians and intellectuals and of Baltic Germans. According to his vision, Estonia had to abandon the idea of a Baltic alliance and collective security and to turn Finland and Scandinavia. Contemporary Latvian politicians, diplomats, and some later historians did not preclude the possibility that Ilmar Tõnisson had been bought off by means of a state grant and the article represented his attempt to please governmental circles. Namely, Tõnisson's studies in Europe, mainly in Britain, in the 1930s were supported by a state grant. He was a talented young man whose intellectual potential, unfortunately, could not be converted to the common good as he was shot by his wife in 1939. Ilmar Tõnisson did not have time to publish much, yet

³³ Edgar Anderson, "Toward the Baltic Union 1920–1927", *Lituanus*, XII (1966); Edgar Anderson, "Toward the Baltic Union 1927–1934", *Lituanus*, XIII (1967); Edgar Anderson, "The Baltic Entente: phantom or reality?", *The Baltic states in peace and war 1917–1945*, ed. by V. Stanley Vardys, Romuald J. Misiunas (London, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978); Edgar Anderson, "The Baltic Entente 1914–1940? Its strength and weakness", *The Baltic in international relations between the two World Wars*, ed. by John Hiden and Aleksander Loit, *Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia*, 3, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis (Stockholm: Stockholms Universitet, 1988).

³⁴ Feldmanis, Stranga, *The destiny of the Baltic Entente*, 89–92.

³⁵ Magnus Ilmjärv, *Nõukogude Liidu ja Saksamaa vahel: Balti riigid ja Soome 1934–1940* (Tallinn: Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia, 1993), 49–50.

³⁶ Ilmar Tõnisson, "Eesti välispoliitika", I–II, *Akadeemia*, 3 (1937), 155–179; 6 (1937), 355–397.

his influence on Estonian political thinking was noticeable.³⁷ In the opinion of some historians, the views expressed in the aforementioned article coincided with the foreign policy views of Estonia's political leadership.³⁸

It is fairly obvious that the publication of such writing in Estonia in 1937 cannot be seen merely as an attempt to undermine or even destroy the questionable sense of Baltic unity or identity. It did not represent a plot prepared by the government circles of Estonia to show that they had the opposition's support for their German-friendly foreign policy. Neither was it a strategic scheme to split the opposition politicians in Estonia. Such a speculation could be raised, though, as Ants Piip, a lawyer as well as a former diplomat and foreign minister who was counted among the opposition, published an article to counter Tõnisson. It was written along traditional lines and confirmed that Estonia definitely belonged to the Baltic states and that claims to the contrary were inappropriate and even malevolent.

I propose a hypothesis that Tõnisson's article represented a geopolitical understanding and explanation of the Baltic states in international relations. The article shows that a new way of assessing international relations was gaining ground in Estonia in the 1930s. Now it has reached the point where we view this as the natural or only way of thinking about the place of the Baltic states in international relations. Calls for Baltic unity are as old as the Baltic states themselves and rest on the so-called geopolitical logic.³⁹ The geopolitical way of thinking appears to be a fairly common way to characterize cooperation between the Baltic states in the twentieth century. Geopolitics as an independent school for understanding international relations was born in the late nineteenth century. In the context of the 1930s, however, it was a modern way of thinking. First and foremost, we must take into account influences from Karl Haushofer and his students and colleagues. Haushofer considered the conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact in August 1939 to be the ultimate fulfilment of his theory in the form of the emergence of the Germany-Russia-Japan alliance.⁴⁰ Such a "geopolitical logic" was opposed by researchers of political geography in England, France, and the United States. The

³⁷ Ilmar Tõnisson, *Emajõe ääres*, ed. by Hando Runnel (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 1997).

³⁸ Ilmjärv, *Nõukogude Liidu ja Saksamaa vahel*, 51.

³⁹ Atis Lejiņš, "The quest for Baltic unity: chimera or reality?" *Small states in a turbulent environment: the Baltic perspective*, ed. by Atis Lejiņš and Žaneta Ozoliņa (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 1997), 148.

⁴⁰ Holger H. Herwig, "Geopolitik: Haushofer, Hitler and Lebensraum", *Geopolitics, geography and strategy*, ed. by Colin S. Gray and Geoffrey Sloan (London, Portland: Frank Cass, 1999), 218–241.

Anglo-Saxon and French scientists dealing with geopolitics countered the German school with writings that emphasized national interests. In their opinion, the German *Geopolitik* was quite clearly in the service of Nazi ideology and politics.⁴¹

The article by Tõnisson in *Akadeemia* in 1937 was the first writing in Estonia that employed the method of explaining international relations primarily through the geopolitical aspect. This accounts for his position that the Baltics constituted neither some natural, determinate whole nor a unified region, and for his suggestions to choose a different direction for Estonia's foreign policy. In his opinion, it was in Estonian national interests to come closer to Scandinavia. Whether and to what extent the Baltic states' political and military leadership conceived of international relations in geopolitical terms in the 1930s requires further research. Even if that was the case, the article by Tõnisson proves that apart from influences from the German school, ideas of a different origin were making inroads into the Baltic states. The publication of such writing in Estonia in 1937 cannot be seen merely as an attempt to undermine or even destroy the questionable sense of Baltic unity or identity. Is it possible to pinpoint some "unity of Baltic space and destiny", the lack of which in the 1930s is blamed on Estonia?

The issue of identity has found its way into international relations as a relatively new trend. Identity is first and foremost associated with social integrity or cohesion in society. If we assume that the state is the central factor in international relations, identity can be found either within the state or in a superstructure encompassing more than one state. In the case of the Baltics, is there indeed a regional identity uniting the three nations? There is no doubt that some kind of Baltic identity exists, and it can be described scientifically. "Baltic" or "Baltic states" (*Baltikum*) can be classified in a number of ways. "Baltic" can denote various fields of activity, people, institutions, processes, individual historical facts, events that are in some way connected to the Baltic states becoming re-independent in 1991. A separate larger group of works can be identified, which are devoted to the search for a content-related common denominator, a common history, a common identity, or even an attempt to form such an identity. Discussions on Baltic identity became especially lively in connection with the restoration of the independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and the increase in the interest of researchers and historians in the region everywhere in

⁴¹ Geoffrey Parker, *Geopolitics: past, present and future* (London, Washington: Pinter, 1998), 26–45.

Europe. There was an attempt to give the region an historical justification through the writing of a new Baltic history.⁴²

In spite of tense cooperation between the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian government institutions and NGOs, we have no public polls or other sources available to allow us to assert that the citizens of Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania perceived themselves as part of some common territorial unit – e.g. as citizens of the Baltic states – prior to World War II. Such polls were never conducted, despite the fact that there was close communication both at the official state level and unofficially. Nor have any surveys of public opinion or regional awareness on the corresponding subject been performed after the regaining of independence in 1991. A shared sense of threat may be the backbone of cooperation on security and defence between the Baltic states.⁴³ Yet it is doubtful whether that would be enough to ascertain an internal, common identity and a sense of unity.

Conclusions

The most common way to answer the question of why the Baltic states cooperated between themselves in the first half of the twentieth century, and still do, is to use the traditional way of explanation, especially where the cooperation is primarily viewed in an external security-related context. It is complicated to explain the belonging of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to some independent, united entity using the concept of identity. We have to take into account external identity imposed by “them” as an important factor calling for some sort of joint action. At the same time, it is not possible to ascertain a Baltic identity that is internal and based on an “us” consciousness. We have no grounds to talk about some generally recognized, understandable-to-all specifics that bind the Baltic states together. It may be assumed that the emphatic statements on Baltic identity are built on rather speculative arguments. At any rate, the notion of “Baltic states” has not come about by virtue of some internal “us” awareness, but rather represents a conviction that a Baltic identity exists that is conditioned first and foremost by external factors. Such a conviction can be ascertained under certain circumstances, that is, in a security-related context, as an external

⁴² Andres Kasekamp, *A history of the Baltic states* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁴³ Mare Haab, “Potentials and vulnerabilities of the Baltic states: mutual competition and cooperation”, *The Baltic states in world politics*, ed. by Birthe Hansen, Bertel Heurlin (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 1–23.

phenomenon only, but it hardly extends to cultural or economic unity, and definitely not to linguistic or religious unity.

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KOKKUVÕTE: *Balti liidu (1934) tõlgendusi*

Kuivõrd ja millega on õigustatud Eesti, Läti ja Leedu kuulumist mingisse iseseisvasse, ühtsesse tervikusse? Kas meil on alust rääkida mingist üldtunnustatud, kõigile arusaadavast eripärast, mis Balti riike omavahel ühendab? Üheks taoliseks ühendavaks faktiks peetakse asjaolu, et Eesti, Läti ja Leedu kirjutasid 12. septembril 1934. aastal Genfis alla üksmeele ja koostöö lepingule. See nägi ette regulaarseid kokkusaamisi välisministrite tasemel. Kuue aasta jooksul (1934–40) toimus 11 kolmepoolset välisministrite kohtumist.

Nn Balti Antandi loomise näol 1934. aastal oli tegemist vana ja peamiselt Balti riikide poliitikute peades ringelnud ebamäärase unistuse realiseerimisega. Balti liidu (*union*) loomise katsed toetusid Esimese maailmasõja päevil ja järel pakutud ideele Balti ja Skandinaavia regionaalsest koostööst ja need haakusid erinevate kavadega Euroopas, mis maailmasõja järel pakuti uue rahvusvahelise olukorra stabiliseerimiseks. Balti Antanti reeglina sõjaliste kaitseliitude hulka ei liigitata. 1930. aastate teisel poolel jäi Balti liidu laiendamine sõjaliseks paktiks vaid teoreetiliseks ja mitte reaalspoliitiliseks võimaluseks.

Välispoliitika primaarsust rõhutades saab Balti kolmikliidu loomist seletada väliste mõjutegurite abil. Nii muutusid Balti riigid aktiivseks koos Poola ja Saksamaa suhete formaalse soojenemisega 1933.–34. aastal. Otsustav tõuge liidu realiseerimiseks tuli väljastpoolt ja oli esmajoones seotud Poola ja Saksamaa mittekallaletungilepingu allakirjutamisega 26. jaanuaril 1934. Lisaks võib kinnitada, et Balti Antant realiseerus pärast seda, kui Nõukogude Liidu juhtkonnas (poliitbüroos) otsustati 1934. aastal hakata toetama Balti riikide omavahelist koostööd.

Balti liidu sõlmimise tausta avades tuleb oluliseks väliseks teguriks pidada 1930. aastatel tehtud katset rajada Ida- ja Kesk-Euroopas kollektiivset julgeolekusüsteemi. Nimelt saab Balti Antanti käsitleda kui loomulikku osa veel laiemast poliitilisest ühendusest, mida tuntakse rahvusvaheliste suhete ajaloos Ida-pakti nime all. Ida-pakti ehk 1920. aastate teisest poolest pärit nimetusega Ida-Locarno lepingu all mõeldi kava sõlmida vastastikuse abistamise leping Nõukogude Liidu, Prantsusmaa, Saksamaa, Poola, Tšehhoslovakkia, Leedu, Läti, Eesti ja Soome vahel. Lepinguprojekti juuri tuleb otsida aastatel 1931–32 alanud Nõukogude Liidu ja Prantsusmaa lähenemisest ning see kava tegi mõne aasta jooksul läbi mitu arengujärku. Idee pidi teostuma Rahvasteliidu põhimõtteid ja regionaalseid kollektiivse julgeoleku ideid arvestades. Lepingu lõplikku versiooni Balti riigid ei näinud ning projektist kaugemale ulatuvat tulemust algatusel ei olnudki. 1934. aasta kevadel ja suvel käisid läbirääkimised Ida-pakti teksti erinevate versioonide üle.

Balti Antandi tegevust aastatel 1934–40 hinnatakse reeglina ebaõnnestunuks, sest ühendus ei suutnud suurendada sinna kuuluvate riikide julgeolekut ega hoidnud ära iseseisvuse kaotamist. Koostöö nurjumise põhjuseid otsitakse reeglina samuti reaalspoliitilistest argumentidest. Kõigepealt sellest, et Eesti, Läti ja Leedu välis- ja julgeolekupoliitikaga tegelevatel inimestel ja ametkondadel olid arusaamad peamistest ohtudest ja prioriteetidest erinevad. Kõik kolm riiki lootsid Balti Antandi abil saavutada erinevaid välispoliitilisi eesmäärke.

Artikkel käsitleb muuhulgas Eesti ühe tuntuima poliitiku, Jaan Tõnissoni poja Ilmar Tõnissoni kirjutist 1930. aastate “vaikiva ajastu” kontekstis opositsioonilises väljaandes Akadeemia. Tõnisson eitas oma uurimuses Balti ruumi ja saatuse ühtsust, ta pidas seda peamiselt Läti poliitikute, haritlaste ja baltisakslaste muinasjutuks. Tema arvates pidi Eesti loobuma Balti liidust ja kollektiivse julgeoleku ideest ning orienteeruma neutraliteedile ja Soomele ja Skandinaaviale. Mõned ajaloolased ei välista võimalust, et artikli näol oli tegemist riikliku stipendiumi abil ära ostetud Tõnissoni katsega meeldida Eesti valitsusringkondadele. Sellise kirjutise avaldamist Eestis 1937. aastal ei saa paraku hinnata vaid kui katset õnnestada või koguni lõhkuda küsitavat Balti ühtsustunnet või identiteeti. Tegemist ei olnud Eesti valitsusringkondade poolt ettevalmistatud salaplaaniga, et leida opositsiooni näilist toetust oma nn saksasõbralikule välispoliitikale. Samuti mitte strateegilise salaplaaniga killustada Eestis opositsioonis olevaid poliitikuid. Käesolev artikkel lähtub hüpoteesist, et Tõnissoni kirjutis oli esimene akadeemilise uurimuse tasemele pretendeeriv kirjutis Eestis,

mis kasutas 1920.–30. aastatel Euroopas levinud meetodit seletada rahvusvahelisi suhteid eelkõige läbi geopoliitilise aspekti.