GEOSTRATEGIC SITUATION OF LATVIA IN RELATION TO THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

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Citation

Abstract

The work addresses the issue of the geostrategic situation of Latvia in relation to Russia's foreign policy, which is important for security in the Baltic Sea region. The work uses literary, historical and systemic methods of analysis. The aim of the work is to present the geostrategic position of Latvia. A historical analysis was undertaken indicating the causes of the current geostrategic situation of the country. The conditions and goals of the Russian foreign policy in the Baltic Sea basin and the strategic goals of actors involved in the region of NATO, the EU, the Russian Federation and Latvia were indicated. The main problems of the geostrategic location include cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns conducted by the Russian media and a real threat to the integrity of the state posed by the Russian inhabitants of the country. It was decided that the Russian population could be used as a tool of pressure on the country's authorities, especially since the Russian minority, constituting approximately 26% of Latvia's population, can create its own parties and demand its rights, including demands for autonomy. The forecast of changes assumes that this problem will increase as Latvia struggles with demographic complications. It can be concluded that the smaller the numerical ratio of Latvians to Russians, the more difficult it will be for them to maintain their own statehood in a potential conflict situation with Russia. This is currently the most serious issue in Latvia's security policy.

Key words

1. Introduction– terminological arrangements and circumstances of the situation

In this study, the geostrategic situation will be understood as geopolitical solutions that are undertaken in the strategies of implementing state policy, especially in its foreign and security policy in the region (Daudel, 1991; Claval, 1996; Bógdał-Brzezińska, 2020a). Unlike geopolitics, geostrategy focuses on the functional aspects of the state activities, situated in the long-term plans in fundamental areas of politics. This is embedding the strategy in precisely defined geopolitical conditions. Therefore, it is a kind of geopolitics in action (applied geopolitics) (Potulski et al., 2022). These carefully planned and coordinated activities are intended to gain a competitive advantage within the international balance of power. The geostrategic paradigm of explaining international relations is dominated by the analysis of the directions of military and diplomatic efforts that a state undertakes to improve its international position and optimize its

own development. Only in the narrow sense of the Cold War period was geostrategy treated as military geopolitics (Brzeziński, 1986; de Montbrial, 2002). In its broad understanding, it also has a non-military dimension, implemented in the form of a national strategy, grand strategy or polystrategy. Its aim is to secure national interests in the international arena, as well as within the domestic policy.

Taking the above into account, the geostrategic situation of Latvia requires, at the beginning, the most important data characterizing the functioning of this country in the region. As a result of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, Latvia found itself in the sphere of influence of the USSR (the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic existed in the years 1940–1990). In 1991, Latvia declared its independence and was admitted to the UN in the same year. However, the last Russian troops left the country only in 1994. In 1999, Latvia was admitted to the World Trade Organization. In spring 2004, it joined NATO and the EU. In 2014, it joined the euro area and in 2016 it joined the OECD. It also belongs to the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the Baltic Council and the Council of the Baltic Sea States.

Before the Covid-19 epidemic (2018), EU countries were Latvia's most important trading partner (71.0%). Among the individual countries, the most important trading partners in exports were: Lithuania (16.0%), Estonia (11.5%), Russia (9.1%), Sweden (7.3%), Germany (7.0%), Great Britain (5.7%), Denmark (4.5%) and Poland (4.1%). EU countries also had the largest share in Latvian imports (80.8%). Among the individual countries, the largest suppliers to Latvia in 2018 were: Lithuania (17.5%), Germany (10.6%), Poland (8.9%), Russia (8.1%), Estonia (7.7%), Canada (4.7%) and Finland (4.4%) (Statistical ..., 2020).

In terms of the economic policy, Latvia's ambition is to achieve sustainable socio-economic development and to become closer to the Nordic countries in its development model. The government includes the issue of energy security among its economic challenges. One should remember that the Russian Federation has already suspended oil supplies to Latvia several times. The privatization policy and attracting foreign capital for direct investment play an important role. Latvia attaches great importance to the development of trans-European transport networks – Rail Baltica and Via Baltica, and also strives to include East-West connections on the list of EU priorities.

As regards defense, the Latvian National Armed Forces (Latvian: Latvijas Nacionālie Bruņotie Spēki) involve 14,700 soldiers, including 8,000 in the National Guard (as of 2019). They consist of the land forces, navy, air force, military police and national defense. The Latvian army is professional;

the last conscripted soldiers left the barracks in 2006. Reservists constitute approx. 3,000 people (The Military Balance, 2019). Latvia cooperates with Estonia and Lithuania in the joint BALTBAT infantry battalion and the BALTRON naval squadron. The equipment and armament of the Latvian armed forces is still largely acquired in the Scandinavian countries and other NATO countries. Latvia does not have armored vehicles. The navy consists of a flotilla of warships in Liepāja and a coast guard flotilla in Riga. The air force is equipped with Mi-2 and Mi-8 helicopters. Latvia's air defense is provided by NATO, which maintains a fighter unit based in Lithuania, patrolling the airspace of the three Baltic countries. Latvia also has a national defense force (Latvian: Zemessardze) of 10,385 soldiers. These are organized reserves consisting of volunteers recruited on a militia basis. It is organized into battalions. However, this formation lost its importance after Latvia had joined NATO. According to 2019 estimates, military spending accounts for 2.01% of GDP (The World Factbook, 2019). The budget of the Ministry of Defense for 2020 is planned at EUR 663.6 million. Additionally, there were plans to increase the number of members of the National Guard (volunteer military units) from 8.2 thousand currently up to 9.5 thousand by 2022 (Kuczyńska-Zonik et al., 2019).

The geostrategic situation in the region is determined by the participation of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in NATO and the EU, as well as the proximity of the Russian Federation, which has different interests and tries to destabilize the situation in the post-Soviet Baltic republics (Stańczyk, 2011). Russian influence will be presented in this text in relation to the classic rules of geostrategy, as well as current political activities resulting from it – diplomatic and non-diplomatic ones.

First and foremost, one should remember that according to the concept of the French diplomat Georges Clemenceau from 1919, Latvia was to be part of the so-called cordon sanitaire – a chain of newly established European states after World War I (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania), separating «old Europe» from the Bolshevik influence of Soviet Russia. Therefore, it was situated as a so-called buffer state, i.e. one that separates one from a potential aggressor or an ideologically dangerous state. After World War II, this concept was still used in international relations, including, thanks to the American diplomat George Kennan, towards a group of countries called people's democracy, separating Western Europe from the USSR.

From a geostrategic point of view, Latvia's location does not provide it with any particular defensive

advantages. Most of the country is lowlands, with hills in the east. Its largest river is the Dvina, which flows through the center of the country. In the event of military threats from the Russian Federation, it may constitute one of the key barriers. It is assumed that the Dvina together with the Dnieper constitute a kind of wall separating Russia from the West. The only road that does not require crossing the two mentioned rivers is the Smolensk Gate, located far beyond the borders of Latvia. For much of history, the Daugava was a trade hub and border river. The commercial and communication importance of both the Daugava River and the entire region is visible when analyzing the country's history.

From the point of view of the Russian Federation, Latvia, as well as the other post-Soviet Baltic republics, is important for several reasons (Kosienkowski, 2006). Consciously, Russians still feel potential external threats from their western borders. From a military point of view, Russia has no natural barriers isolating it from Western countries apart from rivers. Latvia's membership in NATO fuels these fears. Although Latvia itself does not have great military potential, troops, all kinds of military equipment and supply lines can be deployed on its territory. In addition, the capital of Russia is located relatively close to Latvia. The deployment of NATO troops in these territories also makes it possible to bypass the Dvina River, a potential line of defense against possible aggression from the west. Access to the Baltic Sea through the territory of Latvia and the other post-Soviet Baltic republics is also of great importance to Russia. Russians' shipping options in the Baltic Sea are limited because, in practice, they are confined to the Gulf of Finland.

Russia's situation became even more difficult after Finland's accession and Sweden's expected accession to NATO. The Gulf of Finland and the entire Baltic Sea are relatively susceptible to naval blockades, whereby smaller adversary forces can prevent the Russian Navy from projecting forces in the Baltic Sea and block maritime trade. Climatic conditions are also a problem as the Gulf of Finland is unsuitable for navigation all year round (Żurawski vel Grajewski, 2011; Mickiewicz, 2013, 2020). In Russian policy, it would be sufficient to use diplomatic and economic tools to create satellite states that could constitute a Russian buffer zone against Western countries. Therefore, it should be emphasized that without significant Western help, these small Livonian countries could be easily dominated by Russia, which in their case could even be achieved by annexation. It should, therefore, be assumed that any dependence of Latvia on Russia will result in the former losing its sovereignty.

2. Materials and methods

In analytical research, methods of comparative, historical, environmental and systemic analysis were used. The work uses studies and analysis of literature as well as its critical review. In line with the literature in the field of security and geostrategy, a wide spectrum of research was adopted (Stańczyk, 1996; 2010; Mróz-Jagiełło, Wolanin, 2013; Kuc, Ściborek, 2018). The analysis used materials from the Internet «The Globe and Mail», «The World Fact Book», reports of the EU and the EU Parliament, Latvian statistical yearbooks and documents presenting the assumptions of the strategy of Latvia, the Baltic states and the Russian Federation.

The limitations of this work result from the dynamics of ongoing changes related to the problems of NATO enlargement to Sweden (the decision of Turkey and Hungary) and changes in the military situation in the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. However, these two aspects do not change either the general or specific conclusions regarding the strategic dilemmas related to the strategic location and armed forces of Latvia.

3. Result and discussion – characteristics of the influence of the Russian Federation

Latvia remains one of the most important NATO countries due to sharing its border with the Russian Federation and Belarus. Like Estonia, Latvia has a sizeable Russian minority, including non-citizens, who are one of four categories of people permanently residing in Latvia not entitled to citizenship rights under the country's Naturalization Act and who are neither stateless nor citizens of a third state (Wendt, 2021). Citizens of the former Soviet Union living in Latvia who have neither Latvian nor other citizenship were considered non-citizens. They are entitled to passports for non-citizens. Their children born after Latvia gained independence are entitled to Latvian citizenship at the request of their parents. Non-citizens cannot vote or perform certain government tasks and are exempt from military service, but can travel visa-free within the EU under the Schengen Agreement, just like Latvian citizens (The World Factbook, 2019). The Law about restoration of the rights of Latvian citizens (On the Restoration,… 1994), adopted on June 22, 1994 on the basis of an earlier resolution of the Parliament on the principles of naturalization and citizenship, divided persons permanently residing in Latvia into citizens, non-citizens, citizens of other countries

and stateless persons. In 1993, 876,000 people were entitled to the status of non-citizen people, the vast majority of them being Russian (Wendt, 2021). In 2016, there were 232,143 non-citizens, i.e. 11.8%. Of these, 165,316 people were Russians, 34,644 – Belarusians, 24,499 – Ukrainians, and 8,843 – Poles.

The Latvian secret services unanimously agree that the greatest challenge to the country's national security are the actions of Russian foreign policy and its propaganda. However, in their opinion, the threat of a possible military invasion is unlikely under current conditions. The most important threats that Latvia has to face in recent years are: espionage, exploitation of the issue of the Russian minority, propaganda activities of Russian radio and television stations, as well as the activities of extremist groups on the Internet and cyberattacks (Bógdał-Brzezińska, Wendt, 2020; Wendt, Bógdał-Brzezińska, 2022). Diversification of energy sources and goods supplies is also a challenge (Conley et al., 2016).

Together with other Baltic states, Latvia counters Russian disinformation. In addition to taking an active part in solving this problem at the international level, Latvia is committed to combating Russian disinformation within its own country. The Latvian government is aware of Russia's influence and has therefore developed measures to minimize this process. The effective counteraction to Russian influence is due to factors such as the functioning of democratic institutions and the rule of law in Latvia, together with the skeptical attitude of Latvians towards Russia (Conley et al., 2016).

In its actions, Latvia decided first to liquidate and impose fines on television stations that distributed biased materials. A fine was imposed on the PBK station (three times in 2014 and once in 2015), and once on the Autoradio Rezekne radio station. The RTR Planeta station was suspended in 2014 for inciting war and supporting the website «Meduza», founded by a journalist expelled from the Russian portal Lenta.ru (Sarlo, 2017). It should be emphasized that Latvian decision-makers and independent media are trying to offer the Russian minority their own programs and other sources of information that are not part of the Russian propaganda machine, such as the independent television station Dozhd and the Ukrainian TV station Espreso (Bergmane, 2016). In Latvia, it is believed that building awareness among young citizens and saturating the media space with Latvian information will contribute to the fight against Russian disinformation. Projects within the non-governmental sector would play an important role here. In this regard, it is worth noting the significant role of the Baltic Center for Media Excellence (BCME) – a Latvian non-profit organization founded in 2015, which plays a special role in combating Russian disinformation, fake news and propaganda. We can also mention the activities undertaken by Sandra Veinberg, a Latvian journalist working in Sweden, whose activity focuses on detecting disinformation in the media. As well as the work of blogger Jānis Polis, who conducted an investigation into Russian disinformation campaigns, as a result of which he gained recognition from the Latvian Minister of Foreign Affairs (Chase, 2017).

Information security issues constitute extremely important security challenges for Latvia in a geostrategic context. One should also emphasize that in 2015 the Latvian Minister of National Defense issued recommendations to minimize the effects of threats in the information space. The main priorities include the development of public media, reduction of Russia's influence in the information space, and the development of media education (The National Security Concept, 2015).

Some activities undertaken within the framework of media education in Latvia should be noted in this respect. For example, Turība University in Riga offers courses devoted to this issue. Websites also play an important role in media education. The MansMedijs website is run by the Latvian Mediju institute and the European Journalism Observatory. Its main goal is to promote media education for teachers. Schools teach how to distinguish real, reliable information from fake news. It should be emphasized here that, unlike in Estonia, decision-makers in Latvia did not consent to the opening of a Russian news channel.

In turn, the Latvian Minister of Foreign Affairs, participating in the new Baltic-American forum in London in 2017, urged the US Congress to accelerate work on explaining the potential Russian interference in the US presidential elections in 2016, arguing that it is necessary for all US allies to understand the mechanisms of conducting cyberattacks and influencing public opinion (Wintour, 2017).

Latvia also informed NATO troops deployed in this country about the need to reduce Russia's aggressive information influence. They warned against intensifying disinformation campaigns against soldiers from these contingents intended to sow discord between them and the Latvians. This turned out to be true, as such Russian disinformation campaigns were observed (Chase, 2017).

It is noteworthy that Latvia has its own cyberspace defense strategy, which was published in 2014 (Cyber Security …, 2014; Bógdał-Brzezińska, 2020b). The development of the defense policy as well as planning and implementation of its tools are coordinated by the National Information Technology Security Council, which coordinates the exchange of information between the state and private sectors. The National Computer Security

Incident Response Team (CERT.LV) is responsible for national cybersecurity. It cooperates with over 600 IT specialists from government institutions and local authorities. Latvia also has a Cyber Defense Unit, consisting of a group of IT specialists as well as students from the private and public sectors who are trained to assist the military and CERT.LV in the event of an emergency (Ģelzis, 2014). In addition, cyber teams were established in the National Guard and began training in 2016. (Sprūds et al. (eds.), 2017) Latvia has a seconded expert at EEAS East Stratcom in Brussels and is a host for the head of NATO Stratcom. It is also a member of the Finnish COE tasked with combating hybrid threats.

Information from the intelligence services of the post-Soviet Baltic states shows that their decision-makers are aware of their critical geostrategic location. It is pointed out that although these countries could, in principle, count on NATO allies, the Russian army has weapons that in some components significantly exceed NATO's combat potential – Iskander missiles or S-400 triumph system (International security and Estonia, 2020).

According to the Latvian defense strategy for 2016–2020, the threat from the Russian Federation is increasing, which requires strengthening NATO's collective defense as well as the allied presence in Latvia. There is also a need to intensify military cooperation with key allies and develop Latvia's defense potential. Therefore, Latvia proposes to expand NATO's mission to supervise the airspace of the Baltic states (Baltic Air Policing, BAP) to include ground-based air defense systems. It also proposes establishing a base for NATO ships in Liepāja, Latvia. As part of NATO's enhanced forward presence, a multinational battalion battle group (approx. 800–1,000 soldiers), formed by Canada, is already stationed in Latvia. The decision to establish an enhanced forward presence (eFP) was one of the most important decisions of the NATO Summit in Warsaw in 2016. Moreover, Latvia is focusing on tightening military cooperation with the US.

For a long time, Latvia had the smallest armed forces (5,500 soldiers) and defense budget among the post-Soviet Baltic states. Since 2014, however, it has significantly increased its military efforts. In order to prevent and respond to potential Russian military aggression, investments were made in reconnaissance and early warning, increasing the level of readiness of the armed forces, air defense, infantry mechanization and anti-tank capabilities, as well as increasing the presence of regular forces throughout the country. Currently, these regular troops are deployed mainly in western Latvia, with the only presence of territorial defense units in Latgale, bordering with Russia and Belarus (Szymański, 2016, 2017).

The problem of the Russian Federation's influence on the post-Soviet Baltic republics is related to its attempts to regain influence in the international arena. Despite the annexation of Crimea and the eastern territories of Ukraine, the Russian Federation does not yet have sufficient resources and capabilities to threaten the independence of the Baltic states. However, it attempts to test the West's readiness to defend them (Mickiewicz, 2015; for more information: Mickiewicz, 2013). So far, Russia's aggressive expansion into the Baltic areas seems unlikely. The Kremlin will probably wait for ongoing global warming, which will facilitate agricultural cultivation and the exploitation of raw materials hidden under the glaciated earth, as well as Arctic shipping. Moreover, Russians must closely monitor the competition between the United States and China in order to use it in the most appropriate way. The fact that such a possible invasion is not likely yet does not mean that Latvia is completely safe. Russia has a wide range of means with which it can threaten Latvia: economically, diplomatically, cybernetically and politically. One should be aware that Latvia is a country with much less potential than Russia and can always expect actions from it that may threaten its independence. Moreover, it cannot be forgotten that Latvia is classified by Russia as one of the so-called «near abroad». This is a post-Soviet region that, in the long-term, the Kremlin plans to incorporate in the Russian sphere of influence. This is still important because nowadays we are seeing a return to realism in international relations. For Latvia, this means increased challenges and threats from Russia.

Latvia is a country with significant economic exchange with Russia. The embargo imposed by the European Union on Russia turned out to be unfavorable for Latvia. It exported mainly food products to its eastern neighbor. Moreover, Latvia is largely dependent on gas and fuels imported from Russia. The authorities in Riga have been trying to diversify sources of this type of resources for years, but so far, they have been unsuccessful. As gas is transported via pipelines from Russia directly to Germany at the bottom of the Baltic Sea, Latvia's energy security may deteriorate. The Russian Federation Moscow takes advantage of the almost complete dependence of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia on energy resources. It should also be borne in mind that in these countries there are important export infrastructure facilities for Russia (Pronińska, 2012). Latvia's opportunity is the expansion of Baltic ports and the use of the Via Baltica road, as well as the intensification of economic cooperation with partners other than the Russian Federation. To sum up, Russia's economic policy measures that may be

used as a means of putting pressure on Latvia are a serious challenge for Latvia, and it is not safe in this respect.

Given the policy of Western restrictions towards the Russian Federation, Latvia cannot be expected to take actions that will result in its economic disaster. For this reason, it is in the Russians' interest to ensure that Latvia and its neighbors remain alone in the international arena. An ideal opportunity for this would be geostrategic situations related to the destabilization of the international order, which should also include the institutional and legal order in the region.

Taking into account cyber threats (Bógdał-Brzezińska, Wendt, 2020; Wendt, 2023) and political threats, their impact on the possible destabilization of the country should be taken into account. Considering this issue from a geostrategic perspective, it should be noted that Russia is constantly developing its power projection potential in cyberspace (Bógdał-Brzezińska, 2004, 2023). It is true that some countries, such as Estonia, are taking significant preventive measures against this, but the resources available to the Russian Federation in this respect are so overwhelming that in the long run such a competition would be won by Moscow. Compared to the Baltic countries, the Russians have much more equipment, potential IT specialists and more funds that they can allocate to their IT activities. Taking this into account, Latvia is one of the countries that are seriously exposed to cyber aggression. Such an attack, of sufficient size, may result in paralysis of the state on many levels. Undoubtedly, the Latvian authorities must prepare appropriate crisis plans for such a situation.

NATO recognizes threats from the Russian Federation, such as hybrid actions, cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, as highlighted, among others, in the declaration of the NATO summit in Brussels in 2018 (Brussels Summit Declaration…, 2018, point 2&21). Allies welcomed the establishment of the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE) in Riga. It should be emphasized that this location is a clear expression of strengthening cooperation between Latvia and the Western world. This multinational military organization with NATO accreditation, although not part of the Alliance's command structure, is one of the leading centers building competences in the field of strategic communication, including in the fight against disinformation. The materials published by this institution regarding Russia's disinformation strategy and intelligence activities in the Baltic and Nordic countries show that Russia wants to achieve its goals in four areas (Bērziņa et al., 2018):

1)   political: maintaining the status of a superpower, attacking Western values and disturbing the unity of Western countries;

2)   information: creation of a global information system promoting the Russian political perspective and point of view in the media;

3)   military: stopping NATO's expansion towards Russia's borders;

4)   economic: gaining an advantage in a long-term priority economic area, which is the Arctic for Russia.

It should also be borne in mind that, as part of the implementation of its geostrategy, the Russian Federation is interested in creating and then winning the differences between the Baltic states. Therefore, it is advisable to consolidate Western forces within the Baltic region so that the countries of its North (Scandinavian countries) and South (post-Soviet Baltic states) are not guided only by their own interests (An EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, 2006; A Baltic Strategy…, 2006; Cichocki, Osica, 2009).

4. Conclusions

For centuries, Russia has been using means and methods that have enabled it to destabilize neighboring countries (Topolski, 2013). In such situations, the Russian population can be used as a tool to put pressure on the authorities of countries where they constitute a significant national minority, which also takes into account fueling separatism. The Russian minority can create its own parties and demand its rights, including demands for autonomy. In Latvia, the problem of the Russian national minority is particularly visible, as this ethnic group constitutes approximately 26% of all Latvian inhabitants. Riga, like Tallinn, Vilnius and Minsk, closely monitor the situation in Ukraine. Latvians are aware that a similar scenario could be carried out by Russia in their country. They cannot be sure of effective counteraction in the event of such a situation, especially since the Russian minority is well organized and reacts to every attempt to depreciate the Russian language. The above problem will deepen over time, as Latvia is struggling with demographic complications. Depopulation processes and low population density mean that in the near future Latvia will struggle with multi-faceted problems that can be exploited by the Kremlin (Eberhardt, 2017). Therefore, it can be concluded that the smaller the numerical ratio of Latvians to Russians, the more difficult it will be for them to maintain their own statehood in a potential conflict situation with Russia. This is currently the most serious issue in Latvia's security policy.

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