

### Review: Security agenda for the Baltic region: state, society, human

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## REVIEW



### SECURITY AGENDA FOR THE BALTIC REGION: STATE, SOCIETY, HUMAN

*Societal Security in the Baltic Sea Region: Expertise Mapping and Raising Policy Relevance.* – Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2018. – 269 p.

The book *Societal Security in the Baltic Sea Region* [1] addresses an urgent problem that is of both regional and global importance. The volume comprises chapters authored by recognized experts from Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, Poland, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, and Sweden. However, in view of the authors' affiliations and the very problem addressed in the book, it would be more reasonable to broaden the title to include the whole region of Northern and North-Eastern Europe.

The problem of societal security has taken on both practical and conceptual urgency. Diverse factors at play have changed the security agenda of international relations. These changes may have twofold consequences for the Baltic region and the world.

One of them is globalization, which means an increased transparency of national borders for people, goods, and finance. This process is inevitably accompanied by the erosion of national sovereignties. A partial loss of sovereignty provides at least an ambiguous phenomenon as regards regional integration and closer political, economic, and cultural cooperation. It looks especially true for the Baltic region states. At the same time the world faces overwhelming force inevitably taking governance decisions to the supranational level, which still lacks a unified legal framework and universal models of governance that could be compared with national ones in terms of efficiency and social responsibility. In this sense, a partial loss of sovereignty by a state originates its new vulnerabilities.

As for the new security challenges they are also a product of globalization. The growing role of non-governmental actors in

international politics entails the wide use of non-traditional means of influence. Here, the consequences are also twofold. A stronger presence of NGOs and human rights and environmental organizations as well as closer political, economic, academic, and cultural ties are weaving the fabric of cooperation that supplements and enriches intergovernmental interactions. Nevertheless, there is a downside to this process. Still based on the responsibility of states, international law finds it difficult to either control or hold accountable non-state actors, which are moving to the supranational level.

Secondly, dramatic changes have occurred with respect to the military (hard) and non-military (soft) threats: the balance has shifted towards the latter. This has decreased military tension in the Baltic region, as compared to the times of the Cold War. Soft threats became of greater significance because today's society more depends on information and communications technologies, which are permeating all the spheres of everyday life and essential services.

The openness of Western society is fraught with the danger of marginalised strata, criminal communities, and international terrorist networks acting in a way that is destructive or even catastrophic for society. This equally applies to the realm of the moral and the spiritual, resulting in extremist and radical attitudes gaining ground in Europe, as well as the growing popularity of 'protective' right ideologies. The political and economic unrest in North Africa and the Middle East, which resulted in a massive influx of refugees in Europe, gives a clear picture of how serious the problems are that have confronted Northern Europe. In the former Baltic Soviet republics, there is a strong political element to them. These countries are creating proverbial 'fifth columns' by marginalising their Russian speakers.

Thirdly, the attitudes of elites and their perception of security threats in the Baltic region states were strongly affected by the crises in Russia's relations with Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). The sharpest reaction came from former Soviet republics and socialistic states: Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia. These countries were drawing analogies between Russia's policy towards them and the Ukrainian and Georgian scenarios.

Having held an anti-Russia position for many years, they suddenly felt that the defence umbrella, on which they had relied so much, might fail to protect them. The dwindling financial and economic support from the EU for these countries (including Poland – a showcase of successful eurointegration for neophytes) contributes to the sense of premonition among academic and political elites.

In these conditions, the states of Northern Europe and the Baltic region, which have long experience of regional cooperation, have found themselves at crossroads amid growing tensions between the West and Russia. However, this does not mean the consolidation of the Baltic States, but the contrary.

What are the limits to cooperation in security matters and what are possible forms of such cooperation? What are the specific features of national security politics? Is a common security policy possible? Is the crisis in the relations between Russia and the West leading the emergence of a 'third way'? These and many other questions tackled in the book under review will be of interests for many researchers.

As for the methodology, the authors prefer the disputable concept of societal security and continue traditions of the Copenhagen School in security studies. The authors emphasize the idea that societal security prevails over the other types of security: political, economic, military, and environmental. This idea is rooted in the interpretations of security given by post-Positivists, in particular, advocates of social constructivism, on which the Copenhagen School [2] and its adherents [3, 4, 5] heavily rely.

The novelty of the proposed approach to security is the interpretation of threats from the perspective of society rather than of state. Such treatment was never given to security within geopolitics, strategic studies, or neorealism. The traditional view on security focuses on the identification of conditions and factors affecting the perception and formulation of threats as objective phenomena in society-state relations.

The concept of societal security was introduced in the 1990s when smaller European states faced the first consequences of further European integration and globalisation. These included the

emergence of supranational institutions of the EU, as well as many aspects of social life changing to suit external templates. Other consequences included an increase in the number of migrants from European states who were altering the social, ethnic, and cultural environment of the host countries. All this led to a partial loss of national sovereignty. While integration seems to be a blessing, small nations are at risk of losing their identity and finding themselves dissolved among others. It makes reasonable to distinguish between state and societal security.

Following Constructivists, the Copenhagen School brought to the fore the subjective aspect of security as a social phenomenon. The perception of threats is always affected by the identities of individuals, which has many components: political experience, level of education, social standing, ideological preferences, etc. According to the Copenhagen School, a threat is what society considers a threat. The level of threat is identified by analysing a variety of oral and written texts circulating through society.

This reliance on texts and the strong sociological element of this approach make it possible to avoid the subjectivity of the opinions which were appropriated by politicians, the military, and elites and which they try to pass for universally valid. The Copenhagen School believes that the very problem of security is reduced to the persistence of the identity of the state, a social group, or an individual. A threat to security is defined as a threat to identity, which includes such aspects as ideological and religious preferences, culture, nationality, etc.

The above seems reasonable if the sociological approach is perceived as a supplement for the traditional one. However, if the former is to replace the latter (which is proposed by the Copenhagen School), a question arises as to whether the analysis of politics can be reduced to the analysis of political texts. This leaves room for further considerations. However, the authors of the book avoid extremes. They offer an analysis of doctrines and political processes rather than conclusions about securitisation as a speech practice.

Another important postulate is that the state-centric approach to security is outdated since the state cannot always effectively re-



spond to new challenges. This places emphasis on human security, which has to prevail over national security: the former should set the priorities of the latter. The editors of the book call this idea the general thread running through the monograph.

However, there is an inconsistency: the concept of human security, similarly to that of identity, is given a very broad definition [6] both by the authors of the monograph and other researchers. This approach is characteristic of post-Positivism in general and the Copenhagen School in particular. In practical terms, such universality has to protect each and everyone from literally everything: famine, domestic violence, gender-based discrimination, diseases [7], and the list can go on and on. Human security is a beautiful dream but, in reality, it may prove to be objectless. A vivid example is the Norwegian concept of civil protection. One of the authors of this concept, Claudia Morsut, writes: 'it is easier to define what is not included in the [...] term' [1, p. 62]. At the same time, the humanitarian aspects have become an important factor in the security policies of the Baltic region states. This necessitates the analysis and further development of the human security concept.

The authors admit that dialogue on the correlation between human and national security, national and international security, violence and non-violence in politics is far from complete. Moreover, the role of the state in providing societal security remains essential in many cases. Non-governmental actors act effectively only when their efforts are coordinated with those of the state. Overall, it seems that most authors feel constrained in the narrow path set by the editors of the book [1, p. 8]. The only things that most of the works derive from the Copenhagen School are Barry Buzan's concept of societal security and the notion of human security. However, the term 'societal security' was never adequately translated into most of the languages spoken in the Baltic region.

As a result, in the Baltics, Poland, Belarus, and Russia, societal security is not interpreted in line with the views of Buzan but rather understood as part of national social policy and the policies of non-governmental actors. The state and society are not set in opposition as different referents of security. Rather, they are viewed

as bound by a social contract. If such a contact is absent, the state strives to establish it. The use of the concepts of human security and societal security in doctrines are solely formal and without appropriate explanations. The authors of the monograph stress that the concept of societal security has evolved to incorporate the notion of an existential threat to identity and those of human security, sustainable development, and others.

A considerable advantage of the book under review is the novelty empirically-based approach to security in the Baltic region. The authors of the monograph try both to demonstrate the diversity of political practices and to find similarities among different countries. In particular, attention is paid to those, characteristic of the 'Nordic model' (as formulated by Mika Aaltola and Tapio Juntunen).

The long-established Nordic model 'refers to similarities in the transparency in public administration, respect for the rule of law, equality as a key value, and the belief that social welfare heals societal cleavages and produces societal stability' [1, p.31]. These similarities stem from the ambition to build a harmonious society based on state-promoted redistribution of wealth. The other countries of the region, such as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, do not seem to fit this definition.

An interesting feature of the Nordic (or third) way is the policy of neutrality during the Cold War between two superpowers. This particularly applies to Finland. Remarkably, an important stage of rapprochement between Russia and the US was the 2018 summit held in Helsinki. Of course, one should not overestimate the third-way concept: there are heated debates on military security, and the West desires to take Finland and Sweden into NATO.

Many authors draw an important conclusion: threats to security differ from country to country, and this blights the prospects of a common security policy. Thus, a single position of security threats to the Baltic region has never been formulated. The former Soviet republics and socialistic states focus on the 'hard' threats coming from Russia, ranging from a hybrid war to territorial expansion. The Nordic states have opted for a softer security policy usually described as resilience.

These countries link resilience with regulation and cooperation. Moreover, they refuse to recognise any states as antagonistic and place emphasis on societal problems, most of which come from abroad and are associated with uncontrolled migration and terrorism. Iceland postulates the protection of the public against the abuses of state and police as the major problem of security [1, p.44]. Norway and Sweden are also inclined to equate human and civil security.

For the former Soviet republics, represented by Estonia, resilience has little to do with regulation and is closely connected with resistance in the possible warfare with Russia. Technically, after their accession to NATO, the Baltics brought their rhetoric into compliance with the societal security concept. However, the 2008 Russian-Georgian war put everything back on course. An important element of societal security is psychological defence aimed at the 'protection of common values' (including linguistic unification, i. e. the displacement of the Russian language), 'the sense of security', and 'trust amongst the society and towards the actions taken by the state' [1, pp. 102–110]. The Baltic States and Poland find it important to fight against the information warfare allegedly waged by Russia. The Russia-Ukraine crisis added concerns about hybrid threats. Overall, the four countries give priority to national security over societal security.

A number of texts use incorrect terms: 'Russo-Ukrainian war', Russian aggression in Eastern Europe, 'annexation of Crimea', and others. This speaks to the prevalence of anti-Russian rhetoric and the desire to simplify the situation by reducing it to the need for preventing the alleged Russian threat.

As mentioned above, the authors felt constrained within the theoretical framework of the Copenhagen School. However, actual politics have no obligation to comply with any political theory. The advantage of the book under review is that it analyses the actual political situation rather than reflections on it. The latter is the common drawback of studies carried out by constructivists and post-Positivists.

The monograph gives cause for thought as regards the priorities of the Baltic and Nordic States' security policies. These policies are not similar, and they interpret the basic concepts of societal security differently. All this is the result of socioeconomic disparities



and differences in social problems, geopolitical positions, and the history of relations with Russia. The conclusions are made in the final chapter, which sums up the differences in similarities in interpretations of societal security policies.

The only states to pursue a harmonised policy and use cooperation tools are the Nordic countries. In the future, they may constitute the core of a common regional security policy. The authors attempt to outline the common agenda. However, it looks very abstract and resembles a project that should be tackled by the expert community.

In Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, the perception of threats is strongly affected by anti-Russian ideological stereotypes. What causes these attitudes? Is it the fear of becoming Russia's satellite once again? Will these attitudes be reinforced by the dwindling support from the EU? The book gives many answers and raises even more questions.

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