COMPETING STRATEGIC NARRATIVES AND THEIR REFLECTIONS IN PRACTICE: RUSSO-ESTONIAN RELATIONS FOLLOWING THE ANNEXATION OF THE CRIMEA

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ABSTRACT

The current article analyses the prospects of improvement in terms of economic and political relations between Estonia and Russia against the inert background of reciprocal strategic narratives. Estonia's current strategic narrative regarding Russia is mostly influenced by the country's painful historic experience, plus the continuing social segregation within the country between Estonians and Russians, and security threats that stemming from Russia and requiring active NATO deterrence. Russia's domestic vision includes 'Russophobic' western enemies, including Estonia, which surround and threaten it and which place it under an economic blockade. Both sides are also locked into a greater framework involving the European Union's economic sanctions against Russia and Russian counter sanctions. On the other hand, both Estonia and Russia have a lot to gain from possible improvements in economic relations and in reducing regional security-related tensions.

INTRODUCTION

Estonia, along with the other Baltic States, is experiencing a series of deep transformations that can be associated with the drastic deterioration of Europe's relations with Russia in the aftermath of the annexation of the Crimea and the Russia-inspired conflict in eastern Ukraine. However, the ongoing transfiguration of the liberal order lacks one single point of logic and encompasses a number of politically consequential developments that directly affect the Baltic States. There are several facets involved in this situation, the first being the EU-promoted normative space of liberal governance and normative power. The second is the Russo-German bilateral 'economic regionalism' that has been exemplified by the Nord Stream project and the prioritisation of economic relations. The third is the resurgent domain of the regional security complex in the Baltic States, along with the dominant logic of providing a military deterrence and the process of ramping up security levels.

These facets often confront each other and make improvements to regional security and trade somewhat complicated. However, during the recent visit by the president of Estonia, Ms Kersti Kaljulaid, to Russia in April 2019, there was a good deal of discussion about the strengthening of economic relations between the two countries. To quote President Kaljulaid, although mutual sanctions between Russia and the EU are in place, there are some areas in which Tallinn and Moscow could cooperate and move forward, such as transport and taxation (ERR, 2019a). This appears to indicate that Estonia is interested in tightening economic relations with Russia (see ERR, 2019b, for instance where proof is needed). However, just a few months earlier the then-Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sven Mikser, firmly underlined the fact that relations between Estonia and Russia depended primarily upon Russia's behaviour in the international arena in the sense that Russia neither fulfils its obligations nor accepts international law. In this light, bilateral relations between Estonia and Russia simply cannot bloom, regardless of any other aspects. Furthermore, he argued that, based on the historical experience, Estonia sees its role as a country that needs to remind other democratic countries of Russia's unacceptable behaviour (Veebel, 2018). Therefore, within a short period of time, two high-level office-holders in Estonia have sent

considerably mixed signals regarding Estonia's vision of how mutual relations between two countries should develop in the future.

This article aims to discuss the options for providing any improvement to economic and political relations between Estonia and Russia against the background of reciprocal strategic narratives. In general, the outlook for economic relations could be approached in many ways, such as by evaluating the impact of terms of trade or various policy measures which could include economic sanctions, and so on. However, the focus of this study remains fixed on national strategic narratives because, in the interpretation of the authors, strategic narratives reflect policy goals which guide decision-making (De Graaf *et al,* 2015). Next to that, the article discusses the future outlook of economic relations between Russia and the Baltic countries in the wider perspective, referring to a structural transition from a liberal to a post-liberal international order. The process clearly encompasses a number of politically sensitive developments that directly affect the Baltic region.

1. IS THE PROCESS OF RAMPING UP BALTIC SECURITY LEVELS BEING OVERDONE?

This article sees as the relevant theoretical basis for understanding the inner structure and construction process of the narratives being discussed in terms of the process of ramping up the theory regarding security levels. The authors see this as providing common ground, whereby both Estonian and Russian narratives could be brought together and analysed in detail. As will be argued, both narratives can be seen as interpreting a mutual past, present, and future in clear ideological terms and, thereby, strongly influencing the respective reality. Drawing on Buzan's works and his direct contribution, the concept of the process of ramping up security levels has also been developed by the members of what came to be known as the Copenhagen School, with such members as Ole Wæver, Jaap de Wilde, Thierry Balzacq, and others. The end of the Cold War opened up an intensification of debates regarding the referent objects of security: security increasingly drifted away from a purely statistical concept and towards a meaning that involved the security of the state and a view of security as that of the individual. Through the implementation of these incentives, the theory behind the process of ramping up security levels is directly linked to a comprehensive approach to national defence, as this differentiates between various sectors (such as military, political, economic, societal, and environmental sectors), and specific threats that are attributable to each and every sector. This approach makes it clear that existential threats are actually subjective, referring to the contextual nature both of security and security threats (Eroukhmanoff, 2018).

The mechanisms behind the theory regarding the process of ramping up security levels were summed up well by various people, such as, for example, Rita Taureck, who asserted that 'by stating that a particular reference object is threatened in terms of its existence, a player in the process of increasing security levels claims a right to extraordinary measures to ensure the reference object's survival. The issue is then moved out of the sphere of normal politics and into that of emergency politics, where it can be dealt with outside of the normal rules and regulations of policy making. For security purposes, this means that it no longer has any given (pre-existing) meaning but that it can be anything that

a player in the process of increasing security levels says it is' (Taureck, 2006, p 3). In this way, security is the act of speech through which security itself is constructed (Wæver, 1995, pp 55–56), a discursive practice which adds the label of security to any issues that are considered to be of supreme priority and, thereby, legitimises a player's claim to apply extraordinary measures (Buzan *et al,* 1998, p 26). The process is successful when a target audience accepts such a construction and supports extraordinary measures to address the threats (Buzan *et al,* 1998, p 34). As will be argued, the Estonian take on the comprehensive approach and on resilience along the lines of total defence brings along a tendency to impinge the security aspect upon a layer of questions that are related to civil society and to see it as a mere support mechanism for the purposes of defence. However, it removes these issues from the ordinary political debate. Here, Wæver's theory regarding the process of ramping up security levels allows this phenomenon to be critically examined. It makes it possible to see that a comprehensive approach to security has a built-in tendency to add the security aspect to the entire spectrum of public policies, subsuming them under the heading of comprehensive security. Several authors have stated that, in this way, the theory behind the process of ramping up security levels shifts the focus of security studies to the intersubjective level: 'security is a social and intersubjective construction' (Taureck, 2006), 'threats are not separable from the intersubjective representations in which communities come to know them' (Balzacq, 2011, p 214), 'there is no distinction being made between a "real threat" and a "perceived threat", there is only an intersubjective understanding of a threat' (Hjalmarsson, 2013, p 3), to quote some of them. The foundations of theoretical studies by Barry Buzan and the Copenhagen School are also to be found in the practice of international relations. Accordingly, the authors of this study aimed at illustrating the fact that the first stepping stones of a comprehensive approach to security can be found in the growing realisation through international practice of the holistic nature of security, including military, diplomatic, statehood, human security, environmental aspects, and social aspects.

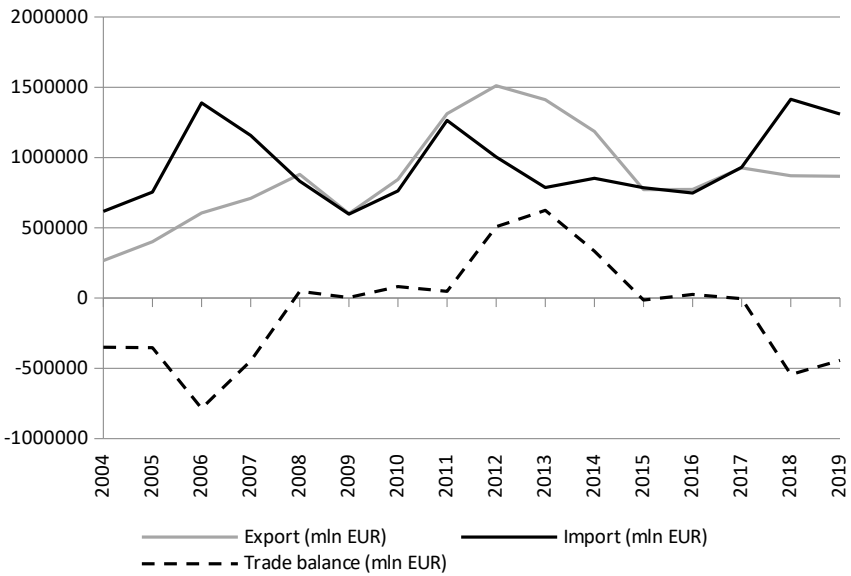
Next to the primary interest point for this article as part of the prospect of a normalisation of economic relations between Estonia and Russia, it is interesting to note that the narratives have another aspect in regard to the democratic character of the state, especially for Estonia. This largely relates to the ramping up of security levels in relation to economic

relations which could be seen as yet another layer in the logic of total defence whereby an entire field is taken out of its normal liberal domain and is pigeon-holed into a corporate logic of clearly-dominant national interests prevailing over economic or civilian interests. Although there appear to be good grounds for mutual distrust, Estonia especially should be aware that it could lead to the state being transformed into a corporate body that is oblivious of its requirements to take care of its population. In more detail, the danger exists that while relying too heavily upon such a narrative, one switches into a war mode. Due to the character of modern hybrid warfare becoming ever more permanent, Estonia could easily find itself in a situation in which the low-intensity hybrid context transforms its normal *modus vivendi* into a wartime total defence mode of existence (Veebel and Ploom, 2019).

2. ECONOMIC RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND ESTONIA OVER THE PAST DECADES

Over the past fifteen years, trade relations between Estonia and Russia have faced turbulent times (see Figure 1). A boom in trade relations in 2004–2006 after Estonia's accession to the EU was followed by a 'bust' period in 2007–2009 due to strained mutual relations and the global economic crisis. Trade between the two countries intensified again in 2010–2012 as a result of the economic recovery of the region after the global economic crisis. However, from 2012 onwards, trade flows have stagnated significantly. Only recently, since 2016, have trade flows between Estonia and Russia started to increase again (see Veebel and Markus, 2018).

FIGURE 1: Estonia's imports and exports with Russia in 2004–2019 (in EUR).



Source: Statistics Estonia, 2019.

Next to changes in economic conditions, the dynamics of bilateral trade flows between Estonia and Russia in the recent past have often been

affected by changes in political relations. For example, the setback in trade relations in 2007–2009 was partially caused by Russia's retaliatory attempt to destabilise Estonia's economy, referring to the conflict over what was known as Estonia's Bronze Soldier monument in Tallinn. During the conflict in April 2007, Russia also called for a cessation of diplomatic relations with Estonia. This was coupled with large-scale cyber-attacks against Estonian state institutions, the blockade of the Estonian embassy in Moscow by Russian youth movements, calls for a boycott by Russian officials against Estonian products, the blocking of goods vehicle traffic at the main connecting bridge into Estonia, and the cutting-off of the delivery of oil, coal, and petroleum products into Estonia (Roth, 2009). These actions have increased the cautiousness of Estonian entrepreneurs as far as deepening economic relations with Russia are concerned. Furthermore, in 2012–2014, Russia implemented several measures to protect its local producers, despite Russia's WTO membership. For example, the importation of live animals and dairy products was banned and several sanctions were introduced in relation to the Estonian fishing sector. This has even further decreased the incentive of Estonian entrepreneurs to enhance trade relations with Russia. Last but not least, mutual sanctions between the EU and Russia which were imposed during the Ukrainian conflict from 2014 onwards have also left their mark on economic relations between Estonia and Russia. Although the overall impact of the Russian sanctions on the economic growth of the EU has been estimated to be rather limited, according to estimations (such as those by Mauricas, 2015; Oja, 2015), the Baltic countries were amongst the EU states to be most heavily affected by Russian sanctions. Russian sanctions have seriously damaged some of Estonia's economic sectors, particularly the food and agricultural sectors.

The future outlook for mutual economic relations is expected to be pessimistic for the most part by Estonian policymakers and experts. Amongst many similar voices, such as, for example, Signe Ratso, the argument is that Estonian entrepreneurs should rely more on diversifying their risks and that local producers should focus on those products which have higher added value, because it certainly helps to find other markets and to request higher prices for such products. Despite the proximity of the Russian market, Estonian agricultural producers in particular should focus on other markets rather than Russia, because the latter is politically sensitive and insecure (Ratso, 2015). However, trade relations between

Russia and Estonia have been in decline on more than one occasion in the past, but have recovered after some time. This brings us back to the research question of whether economic relations between Estonia and Russia could once again recover in the aftermath of the Ukrainian conflict. The comparison of reciprocal strategic narratives and visions could give us a good hint in this regard.

3. A LOOK AT THE RESPECTIVE STRATEGIC NARRATIVE OF ESTONIA ON RUSSIA

How do we define the strategic narrative within the framework of the current study? According to Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (Miskimmon *et al,* 2018, p 6), strategic narratives are stories '*by which political players attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international players*'. So strategic narratives may be projected to serve several aims, some of which may be very different aims, such as justifying the strategic objectives of the related states or explaining political responses to economic, political, or security crises or issues, forming international alliances, organisations and so on, and also to rally domestic public opinion.

How do the narratives originate? This internalisation of a disseminated narrative is what can be considered to be the point or origin of the narrative. For a narrative to have reasonable meaning and effect, it must be internalised by a group that forms part of the audience. Therefore, within the current study, we analyse narrative origination within the context of entrenched social identities, academic publications, and contemporary public media.

There is also a need to analyse how the narratives manage to propagate themselves. We consider the propagation of narratives as a function of the internalisation of those narratives that serve to affect attitudes that are linked to domestic and foreign political issues. We refer to these manifestations as narratives that are domestic (Estonian) and foreign (Russian in the current case). By internalising these foreign (and in some cases also hostile) narratives to the point that they crystallise into opinions about public policy, members of the population themselves legitimise and ultimately spread these foreign narrative. The degree of crystallisation and the strength of opinion creates varying degrees of vulnerability within the audience. In practice, some groups will have hardened opinions (in any direction), while others will remain more malleable and open. Segmentation analysis refines this understanding to illustrate how

combined narratives can and do resonate with, and therefore propagate through, different audience groups in Estonia.

In terms of a practical case, following the restoration of Estonia's independence in 1991, the country has constantly struggled to redefine its relationship with its biggest neighbour, Russia. On the one hand, from the 1990s onwards, Estonia's strategic narrative has mostly been grounded on the argument that it has any right at all to be a sovereign country based both on legal and historic grounds, and that Russia has in many occasions violated this right (Doroško *et al,* 2004). Next to that, the historical narrative of Estonia is characterised by the differentiation between Estonians and Russians, with both groups carrying rather clear-cut political connotations. Pääbo (2011) argues that Russians are described through a negative prism, stating that Russians have played a significant role in all of the 'big wars' that have taken place within the territory of Estonia, and that Russia has over the course of recorded history been an 'uninvited interferer', against whom Estonians have had to resist to the point of armed conflict. This view, of course, exists in parallel with an alternative, and more positive take on the matter. To highlight an example, Eerik-Niiles Kross states that nowadays, Estonians have accepted that many Russian-speaking people live in Estonia and Estonians do not feel threatened by them. However, even Kross has to admit that a degree of differentiation is still made between 'us' and 'them' (Sirp, 2015).

On the other hand, Estonia has only once had to revise its basic strategic narrative of Russia in the recent past. In the early 2000s, many international organisations (such as Nato and the EU) considered Russia as a partner and not as an adversary, which contradicted the Estonian viewpoint outlined above. For example, in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Nato repositioned itself from an organisation that was committed to the principle of collective defence into a multitasking body that could deal with issues beyond the initial concept of collective defence. This means that the focus of the organisation has also shifted from Russia to other topics, such as anti-terrorism activities, peace-keeping missions, and crisis management (Andžāns and Veebel, 2017). Next to that, various of the world's political leaders have expressed their widespread support for Russia. For example, in 2004, George W Bush announced that the US stood shoulder to shoulder with Russia in the fight against terrorism, and this is not a lone case. This situation was relatively confusing for Estonia

in the sense that it was unclear for Estonians how far the cooperation between the US and Russia was going to develop, and whether both countries really were fighting against the 'same enemy' or whether they may later realise that they were indeed fighting against different enemies for different purposes (for further discussion, see Made, 2004). This means that Estonia had to revise its strategic narrative towards Russia too, and had to accept that other countries may see Russia differently from the way in which Estonians saw it. The situation changed greatly following the outbreak of the Georgian war in 2008, and even more so after the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict in 2014. During the conflicts, the political leaders of Estonia had condemned Russia's actions many times, expressing their support for Georgia and Ukraine. So whereas Estonia had in the early 2000s gone along with the strategic narrative of the Western countries in describing Russia as a partner and not as an enemy, the country had to be disappointed again because this vision of Russia turned out to be not true. Therefore, it is understandable that Estonia sees its role today as a 'watchdog' among the Western countries, as someone who needs to remind democratic countries of Russia's unaccepted behaviour (see Pealinn, 2018). Yet this overlaps with the narrative of Estonia as a 'truth teller', as someone who needs to reveal to the world all the erroneous interpretations of the Second World War that Russia is constantly spreading (see Doroško *et al,* 2004).

Estonia's strategic narrative of Russia today is clearly mirrored in the public discussion and its content focuses strongly on security threats stemming from Russia. In political speeches, public discussions, Estonian-language newspapers, etc., Russia is mostly described as an adversary, or someone from whom Estonia needs to seek protection. For example, the National Security Concept of Estonia of 2017 states that immediate threats to Estonia's security are primarily related to the security situation in the Euro-Atlantic region, which, in turn, is affected by Russia's increased military activities and aggressive behaviour. The strategy document describes Russia as a source of instability due to the latter's unpredictable, aggressive, and provocative actions, such as airspace violations, offensive military exercises, and threats to use its nuclear capabilities. It also claims that Russia is interested in restoring its position as a great power, without any fear of potentially coming up against any staunch opposition with the Western world and the Euro-Atlantic collective security system (National Security Concept of Estonia, 2017).

Furthermore, the latest annual report by the Estonian Intelligence Security Service dedicates about two thirds of its volume to various threats stemming from Russia. The report sets out the following: '*the main external security threat for Estonia arises from Russia's behaviour, which undermines the international order. /…/ Ukraine will be the main target of those measures this year, but Russia will not hesitate to use them even against its ally, Belarus. /…/ Countries in the European Union and Nato are not fully protected from Russia's aggressive activities*'. The report reaches four main conclusions that directly refer to Russia's threatening behaviour. Firstly, that the Russian armed forces are consistently practising for an extensive military conflict with Nato, with all of the scenarios for Russia's command-post exercises over the last two decades having relied on the prospect of conventional warfare against Nato and its member states. Throughout this period, the structure of Russian warfare scenarios and exercises has remained the same, despite the fact that meanwhile Nato has deployed its forces in the Baltic states and Poland. Secondly, the report argues that the trigger for a military conflict between Russia and Nato will be a 'coloured revolution' in one of Russia's neighbouring countries, most likely Belarus. Thirdly, the report suggests that Estonia has to be prepared for a military incursion from the direction of Russia even if a potential conflict between Russia and Nato is sparked by events elsewhere in the world. This is probable because, as far as Russia is probably concerned, the Baltic countries constitute part of Nato that would be the easiest for Russia to attack in a time of a crisis. and also to shift the balance of military power on the Baltic Sea region in its favour. Fourthly, it states that a conflict between Nato and Russia would not be limited to military action in Eastern Europe or the Baltic countries, but would also involve Russian attacks on Western European targets, as Russian armed forces are constantly developing their doctrine of attacking 'critical enemy targets' and are building up their related medium-range weapon systems which could be used to attack targets in Western Europe (Välisluureamet, 2019).

Last but not least, the most illustrative quote that reflects upon Estonia's fears and security risks today comes from Colonel Riho Ühtegi, head of the National Defence League, who rather emotionally stated that '*The Russians can get to Tallinn in two days... Maybe. But they can't get all of Estonia in two days. They can get to Tallinn, and behind them we will cut their lines of communication and supplies and everything else. They can*

get to Tallinn in two days. But they will die in Tallinn. And they know this... They will be under fire from every corner, at every step' (see McKew, 2018). All this demonstrates that the current strategic narrative in Estonia considers Russia as an adversary. Of course, these threats are to a considerable extent real, but in terms of their construction and interpretation one can clearly detect aspects that are related to a ramping up of security.

To sum it all up, the common historical legacy with Russia takes its toll on the current ethnic composition of Estonia, its political and economic ties, and its membership in international organisations, priorities, and so on. Over the past decades, Estonia has attempted to break ties with Russia. Furthermore, the country has both systematically developed its defence forces to better safeguard its security (see for instance Andžāns and Veebel, 2017, or Cooper, 2019) as well as having contributed to the Nato Alliance with the aim of benefiting from the Alliance's deterrence model and to gain guarantees of stability and peace in the Euro-Atlantic region (Ploom, Sliwa, and Veebel, 2020). Based on the national strategic narrative, Russia clearly remains an adversary for Estonia, and other potential visions, such as 'Estonia as a bridge between East and West' or 'Estonia as a positive influencer' (i.e. someone who could encourage Russia to implement reforms and to become a democratic society) are clearly 'out of the picture' today. The lack of trust in Russia was most recently reflected in the public reaction to the announcement that the president of Estonia, Kersti Kaljulaid, visited Russia in April 2019 after many years without any high-level visits between two countries. Local politicians have mostly used either a 'wait-and-see' approach or have been critical as far as the aims of the visit were concerned and the way in which the visit was organised (see for example ERR, 2019b; ERR; 2019d). No significant results were expected in Estonia from this visit. However, in practice, this was the first high-level effort to rewrite Estonia's current strategic narrative for Russia as an enemy and to replace it with a new one, if not one in which Estonia is a bridge between East and West then at least one that involves neighbours which have the possibility of experiencing civilised cohabitation in the region.

It certainly needs a lot of time and effort for Estonians first to construct and then to accept this new narrative. However, it should not be totally impossible. A study by Doroško et al (2004) suggests that Estonia's narrative for Russia and the foreign policy Estonia is carrying out towards

Russia is not something that is inevitably negative per se, but just a practice that is being established. Indeed, the way in which Estonians see Russians is not carved in stone; however, a great deal depends upon Russia's behaviour, because Estonians expect Russia to accept international laws and democratic values. In this light, it would be unrealistic to expect attitudes to change overnight in Estonia, or that in the nearest future, Estonia could start to enhance economic contacts with Russia. However, in the long-term this certainly cannot be ruled out.

4. WHAT DOES RUSSIA THINK OF ESTONIA? A STRATEGIC NARRATIVE OF ESTONIA'S BIG NEIGHBOUR

The roots of Russia's strategic narrative in regard to Estonia can be seen to lie in the way Russia has positioned itself after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. It has been argued that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia lost two of its status symbols: its communist ideology (in contrast to the prevailing liberal democracy), and its system of so-called allies in the so-called former Soviet bloc. However, the country maintained three other status symbols: its status as the world's biggest country in terms of territory; its permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council; and its nuclear arsenal (see Made, 2004). Based on these three status symbols – size, international representation, and capabilities – Russia began to develop a new identity in the 1990s and is today exploiting those symbols in restoring its position as a great power in the world arena.

Overall, in the 1990s, Russia accepted the idea of a multipolar world with many 'power centres' (the so-called Primakov doctrine), but not the idea of a unipolar world with the US as a single power centre. Whereas the multipolar approach was considered prestigious for Russia because the country considered itself as one of these 'powers' together with the US, the EU, China, and Japan, which together effectively ruled the world, the idea of a unipolar world with the US as the supreme power was a humiliating concept for it. Intriguingly, the multipolar approach allowed Russia to emotionally realise its status symbols, but at the same time, the country clearly lacked the resources to fully realise the full potential of its multipolar image in the global arena. So in following years, Russia realised that the prospect of a true multipolar world was unrealistic because the country does not have the required resources to oppose the US. In order to avoid the resultant loss of prestige in the global arena, Russia developed an ideology of 'selective multipolarity', meaning that from time to time Russia would return to the multipolar ideology, particularly in its relations with the EU, with the aim of strengthening Russia's position in Europe in comparison to Western countries. This allows the country to demonstrate that Russia is as important as are the Western countries, at

least as far as the security environment in Europe is concerned (Made, 2004). Russia has also used the same pattern recently such as, for example, in stressing its role in 'stabilising' the Ukrainian conflict in relations with France and Germany, in guaranteeing the Minsk agreements, and in interfering in various conflict situations in other places, such as Syria and Venezuela.

In this respect, it seems to be important for Russia to demonstrate to everybody that Russia is playing an important role in the global arena. At the same time, the country very carefully selects its opponents, allies, and conflict locations. Therefore, it should not be automatically assumed that Russia is looking for conflict with everybody or that it wants them everywhere. The events in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 are a good example of that. More precisely, in 2010, the Kremlin could easily have intervened in Kyrgyzstan during the ethnic conflict when the previous government was replaced by pro-Western reformists, but Russia decided not to do so, although the government of Kyrgyzstan has asked for Russia's help in solving the violent conflict between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. This decision is somewhat peculiar, as it would have been in the hegemonic interest of Russia to increase the legitimacy of its power in the region. Basically, the same situation happened in the 1990s, when Russia decided to send its military into southern Kyrgyzstan. However, twenty years later Russia took an opposing view and, instead of solving the conflict in Kyrgyzstan, it focused on the struggle with the US over the transit centre of Manas which is located near Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan (see Veebel, 2017).

Next to that, it has been argued that, historically, Russia's strategic narrative is closely related to the country's territorial history combined with a strong dimension of multiculturalism. In more detail, Russia's strategic narrative pays a lot of attention to unity; although, this seems to be more about territorial unity and not so much about ethnic unity (Pääbo, 2011). The protection of its territory against external pressure and invasion seems to be an important component both of Russia's strategic narrative and its domestic image. In this light, it is not surprising that today, Russia depicts the Nato Alliance as a body that threatens Russia (see Financial Times, 2016, for example). Stoicescu (2015) argues that the Kremlin's propaganda constantly accuses Western countries of provoking Russia politically and economically, interfering in Russia's internal affairs with the aim of bringing the country to its knees and toppling

Putin's administrative regime. He concludes that the main purpose of this narrative is to exploit the fear in Western countries of war, and to increase their readiness to make compromises as far as Russia's ambitions and actions are concerned (see Stoicescu, 2015).

Ethnically, Russia considers all of the ethnic groups that currently live within Russia's territory as part of Russian civilisation and culture (Pääbo, 2011). Furthermore, ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking communities in areas, such as Ukraine, Moldova, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and even the Baltic countries are considered 'near abroad' regions that are within Russia's sphere of influence due to the Russian-speaking minorities that currently live there. This clearly opposes Estonia's strategic narrative which states that Estonia has the right to be a sovereign country and that Russia has on many occasions violated this right. From Russia's perspective, it has any right to protect Russian-speaking minorities in other countries. Furthermore, Russia has relied on this argument both in Ukraine and in Georgia, declaring its responsibility for the protection of the rights of certain vulnerable social segments of its neighbouring countries, and pointing out the unacceptable conditions of the Russian-speaking population in those countries (see Veebel, 2017; Schatz, 2007).

Several experts have discussed the main features of Russia's attitude towards the Baltic countries and have highlighted those problems that most trouble Russia (see Morozov, 2004; Kramer, 2003; and others). As has already been mentioned, the situation for and status of Russian minorities in the Baltic countries seems to be one of these troubling problems. High-level Russian politicians often raise this issue in the media and publicly criticise Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. For example, the Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov has recently criticised the idea of joint schools for Russian-speaking and Estonian-speaking children, calling it unacceptable because, in his opinion, this idea is not in the best interests of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia (Russkiy Mir, 2019).

Another problem that seems to trouble Russia is the 'truth teller' narrative of Estonia (as a country that needs to reveal to the world all the erroneous interpretations of the Second World War that Russia is constantly spreading), or the 'watchdog' narrative (Estonia as a country that needs to remind Western democracies of Russia's unaccepted behaviour). Overall, Russia prefers to call it 'Russophobic' or 'anti-Russian hysteria', referring

not only to the Baltic countries but also to the Nato Alliance and the US in general (see The embassy of..., 2018; Ellyatt, 2016, as examples). On the one hand, studies have revealed that the Russian political elite is trying to construct the identity of the 'Russian world' or 'Russkiy Mir' that is based on a positive attitude towards a joint communist past. Any attempts to oppose this narrative are considered to be attacks against the collective identity of Russia and, consequently, as a threat to Russia's security (see Tamberg, 2016, for example). Therefore, the narrative of the 'Russian world' in which countries are happy about their common communist past is completely incompatible with the narrative of Estonia as a 'truth teller'. On the other hand, Russia is constantly arguing that the prevailing opinion, particularly in Estonia and Latvia, that Russia is a threat to them is groundless, and is meant only for the purpose of solving domestic problems within the Baltic countries, such as in mobilising voters by creating the image of a foreign enemy (ERR, 2017). The situation is particularly absurd in the sense that at the same time, Russia uses the same argument to mobilise its own people by presenting the Western countries as a common enemy of Russia.

Intriguingly, Aleksandr Sõtin argues that Russia today is already used to the idea that Estonia is an independent country, and that both the Russian political elite and local diplomats think of the Baltic countries only in new terms. To describe these terms in more detail, although Nato promised not to accept these countries as members of the strategic defence alliance, it has still done so, and is currently expanding its military capabilities in the Baltic Sea region. Sõtin suggests that the fact that Russia is constantly blaming the Baltic countries for violating the rights of Russian minorities in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania should be considered as being part of a 'normal process' because Russia simply must justify its vision of Russophobic enemies surrounding the country. Estonia seems to be a 'secondary' country for Russia and the only aspect that makes Estonia interesting for Russia is its Nato membership. Sõtin also argues that Russia has made some miscalculations in the past as far as the Baltic countries are concerned. For example, several years ago, Russia was expecting the Baltic countries to come and beg for the restoration of transit flows, but this did not happen. Next to that, Russia was expecting that the Baltics would support the Nord Stream project, but this also failed to happen (see Piirsalu, 2018). In this light, Russia seems to picture Estonia as a 'weak' and 'unimportant' country. This

negative image of the Baltic countries is also stressed by the Russian media (Cavegn, 2017). Furthermore, some Russian media channels and policy analysts have interpreted the recent visit to Moscow by the president of Estonia, Kersti Kaljulaid, as a sign of weakness, and have argued that even those countries which initially advocated strongly for sanctions against Russia have finally realised that it is more useful to be friends and to trade with Russia (see Fefilov, 2019). This does not leave much room for cooperation on even terms between Russia and Estonia. For Russians, Russia will remain 'great and strong' and Estonia will be 'small and weak'.

5. PROSPECTS FOR MUTUAL ECONOMIC RELATIONS BETWEEN NEIGHBOURS IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

As has become evident, there are fundamental differences in the national strategic narratives for Estonia and Russia, particularly in the way both countries interpret the common historical past, recognise the validity of international law, and understand their roles in the international arena. In this light, the blooming of trade relations between Estonia and Russia in the nearest future is rather unlikely because there is simply no common ground upon which to develop mutual economic contacts. It should also not be forgotten that the economic sanctions between Russia and the Western countries set limits on further economic cooperation between Estonia and Russia. Today, there seems to be no intention on the either side to lift the sanctions. On the contrary, Russia uses the narrative that sanctions are the consequence of Western hegemonic ambitions against a resurgent Russia and that countering Western sanctions is a test of Russia's ability to remain a 'great power' (see Joao, 2017). From the perspective of Western countries, EU countries simply cannot distance themselves from the European norms and values until the territorial integrity of Ukraine is restored and the conditions of the Minsk I and II agreements are fulfilled, because this would seriously harm the collective reputation of the EU as a normative power in the international arena (see Veebel and Markus, 2018). Of course, over the passing of time and with the appearance of some positive moves on behalf of Russia, the lifting of most salient sanctions could still happen. In the meantime, however, several European politicians have suggested imposing new sanctions on Russia to punish the country for the incident in November 2018, where Russia opened fire on Ukrainian vessels near Crimea (Osborn and Zverev, 2018).

Nevertheless, theoretically, the recovery of trade between Estonia and Russia is possible under certain circumstances. The first of these would involve cooperation between the EU and Russia reaching a stage that could deliver significant benefits both for Russia and Estonia. The second would be if those risks that are related to Russia's erratic behaviour on the international stage were to decrease significantly.

The first option potentially relates to the outlook for the strategic partnership between the EU and Russia. Mutual relations have long relied on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which has been in force since 1997. Negotiations on the new agreement in the form of a strategic partnership were launched in 2008. In light of Russia's actions in the Crimea and in eastern Ukraine all talks on the new cooperation agreement have been suspended. In her recent visit to Moscow, the president of the Republic of Estonia, Kersti Kaljulaid, called for an upgrade of the EU-Russia cooperation programme (ERR, 2019c). The need for a 'new partnership' with Russia has also been stressed by some EU member states (such as France) within the framework of the European strategic autonomy initiative. In this sense, the new cooperation agreement between the EU and Russia may present an opportunity for Estonia to create favourable conditions in trade relations with Russia, assuming that at a certain point in time the respective negotiations will continue. Alternatively, there is most likely more motivation for both sides to cooperate after some EU-financed large-scale infrastructure projects have finally been carried out (such as the Rail Baltic railway project within the framework of the Trans-European Transport Network). Although some developments contradict this view, such as the fact that the Baltic economies are more and more services-orientated or that transit from Russia has shown historically low levels over the past two or three decades, the Rail Baltic project together with the planned tunnel between Tallinn and Helsinki are expected to allow Baltic foreign trade and transit to grow (see Veebel *et al,* 2019). This could potentially also boost economic contacts between the Baltic countries and Russia.

The second option is associated with a potential change of political regime in Russia. It could, in principle, be argued that the hidden agenda of the Western sanctions against Russia has been to initiate a regime shift in Russia without destroying the country economically. However, although more and more public protests and demonstrations have been taking place in Russia in recent years against Vladimir Putin's administration, a radical regime shift in Russia is still rather unlikely thanks to a largely missing strong and united opposition, and the lack of political alternatives.

To sum up, the normalisation of trade relations between Estonia and Russia is rather unlikely against the strategic narratives of both countries, because there is a lack of 'common ground' and motivation for both sides.

Russia is clearly able to survive and recover under veritably challenging economic conditions without developing extensive trade relations with Estonia. On the contrary, any attempt to distance itself from the current strategic narrative of Russia being surrounded by 'Russophobic' enemies would basically mean that the country gives away its main 'selling point' at the domestic level. Next to that, Russia's recent activities in destabilising its neighbouring countries clearly indicates that the country has developed a well thought-out and long-term strategy when it comes to making post-Soviet countries dependent upon Russia in various aspects, such as economic, ethnic, and military dependence, and is finally realising this advantage in achieving its political ambitions. Both the geographic location and the common historical background seem to work in Russia's favour over other regional power centres. The main targets of Russia's geopolitical ambitions are Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, and Kazakhstan as sort of 'low-hanging fruits' due to their distance from Western associations. Yet this could also apply to the Baltic countries as, from Russia's perspective, the application of the neo-imperial model clearly depends upon particular conditions being in Russia's favour. In addition, Russia has used the economic lever, especially trade conditions, to punish Estonia and other Baltic states in the past for perceived incorrect political choices (Veebel *et al,* 2020). Therefore, Russia's past moves, its aggressive behaviour, and its neo-imperial ambitions in the international arena have definitely decreased the motivation of Estonian politicians and entrepreneurs to deepen economic ties with Russia in the nearest future, making them instead more cautious about Russia in general.

The prospects for the recovery of trade flows between the neighbours also presents Estonia (and other EU member states) with a moral problem. In other words, there is the question of whether it would be ethical to sacrifice the security of one's country to cooperate with a state that is constantly threatening you and does not share the same values as you. In this light, and from the Estonian perspective, it is somewhat astonishing to see that despite violent conflicts, mutual sanctions, and constant accusations, trade relations between Russia and Ukraine are intensifying again after the annexation of Crimea (see Figure 2), and that in 2018, Russia remains the main trading partner for Ukraine (TASS, 2019).[1] Be

[1] Only recently, in the first quarter of 2019, has Poland became the number one export market for Ukrainian goods (Business Ukraine, 2019).

that as it may for Ukraine, it is difficult for Estonia to accept that one can simultaneously declare unwavering support for territorial integrity and the independence of sovereign countries in the international arena, and to request cooperation in other issues with a state that has illegally annexed Crimea (for further discussion, see Veebel and Markus, 2018).

FIGURE 2: Ukraine's imports and exports with Russia in 2010–2018 (in billions USD).

Source: Trading Economics, 2019.

6. WIDENING THE SCOPE OF THE DISCUSSION: STRUCTURAL TRANSITION FROM LIBERAL TO POST-LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The three Baltic countries, along with the entire Baltic Sea region, are experiencing a series of deep transformations which, in the current academic literature, are associated with the drastic deterioration of Europe's relations with Russia in the aftermath of the annexation of the Crimea and the war in Donbas. Yet in a broader sense these changes are part and parcel of a structural transition from liberal to post-liberal international order, a non-linear process that differently affects regions that have been supported by the direct sponsorship of the EU. The ongoing transfiguration of the liberal order lacks clear logic and encompasses a number of politically consequential developments that directly affect the Baltic countries. Russia is clearly interested in exploiting this weakness, showing that the West is weak and helpless, and that '*the current crisis of liberalism will definitively bury the unipolar Western system of hegemony*', to quote the Russian media. Furthermore, Russia's media argues that populism and regional protectionism could serve as the basis for a new, multipolar world order (see Savin, 2018).

Next to the fundamental changes in the international order, the bulk of current dynamics seems to be grounded in the *de facto* fragmentation of the Baltic Sea region into three largely disconnected spheres. First of these is the EU-promoted normative space of good and liberal governance. Second is the Russo-German bilateral 'energy regionalism', which is exemplified by the Nord Stream project. Third is the resurgent domain of the regional security complex with its dominant logic of military deterrence. Besides this, it is becoming increasingly clear that Poland is interested in promoting the Intermarium project and participating in the Three Seas Initiative, but not so much in political investment in terms of region-building for the Baltic Sea area. Developments in adjacent Northern Europe range from the re-actualisation of Nato membership discourses in Finland and Sweden, coupled with the drastic deterioration of Russo-Norwegian relations, to the recent initiative of the Barents Council which is aimed at creating a visa-free Barents area regime in spite of the extant Schengen regulations. These new circumstances, trends,

and processes create a new, much more multifarious and less predictable (geo)political environment for the Baltic countries. The complexity of those political transmutations that have briefly been described above is a challenge for each of them. The gap between the Baltic countries and Russia has widened during the last five years. After 2014, the security aspects should definitely not be analysed solely in terms of strategic and geopolitical interaction between the West and Russia. The Baltic countries have been among the most concerned in the EU regarding Russia's potential actions. The fears and worries that have been experienced and expressed by Baltic societies and politicians have been heard by their Western partners, including European Union institutions. This is clearly reflected in plans and undertakings to deal with disinformation, and with military and hybrid threats against the EU, including the build-up of PESCO, the European Defence Fund, and provisioned expenditure from the MIFF in 2021–2027. These developments demonstrate a clear case of Europeanisation from the bottom-up (or 'uploading'), in which Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian concerns (in the form of principles and values) in terms of defending the Baltic countries have had an effect when it comes to changing perspective and attitude towards security issues at the supranational EU level. However, the question still remains whether this is enough to deter Russia in creating instability in the Baltic Sea region and in putting pressure on the Baltic countries.

CONCLUSIONS

The article has aimed at a discussion of the prospect for economic relations between Estonia and Russia against the background of reciprocal strategic narratives on both sides. Estonia's strategic narrative of Russia today is strongly influenced by the country's historical experience, the differentiation between Estonians and Russians, and the security threats that stem from Russia. Based on the national strategic narrative, Russia clearly remains an adversary for Estonia. Other potential visions, such as 'Estonia as a bridge between East and West' or 'Estonia as a positive influencer', are today out of the picture. In turn, Russia's national strategic narrative also seems to speak against improving relations with Estonia. Russia's current domestic image is based on the vision that 'Russophobic' and 'hysterical' enemies are surrounding it. The country also prefers to use the ideology of 'selective multipolarity', particularly in its relations with the EU, which allows the country to feel itself as being as important as Western countries as far as the security environment in Europe is concerned. Next to that, Russia constantly argues that Estonia does not respect the rights of its Russian minorities, and so on.

Therefore, it can clearly be seen that there are fundamental differences in national strategic narratives between Estonia and Russia, particularly in the way in which both countries interpret their common historical past, recognise the validity of international law, and understand their roles in the international arena. In this light, the blooming of trade relations between Estonia and Russia in the nearest future is rather unlikely, because there is simply no common ground upon which to develop mutual economic contacts. Furthermore, both the economic sanctions between Russia and the Western countries which are set limit to further economic cooperation between Estonia and Russia, as well as Russia's aggressive behaviour and neo-imperial ambitions in the international arena, serve to decrease the motivation of Estonian politicians and entrepreneurs when it comes to deepening trade relations with Russia in the nearest future. Theoretically, the recovery of trade relations between Estonia and Russia is possible under certain circumstances. Still, in practice the strengthening of economic cooperation between these neighbours is unlikely due to various security aspects.

However, as far as the conflicting strategic narratives of both countries are concerned, Estonia has made the first effort to rewrite Estonia's current strategic narrative for Russia as an enemy. As it contemplates with the wish to replace it with the new one, of Estonia as a bridge between East and West, there are some loose ends that could potentially be tied up, assuming that Estonia is interested in developing economic contacts with Russia. Firstly, in the future Estonia should keep a careful eye on all EU initiatives that are targeted towards Russia, particularly towards the upgrading of the EU-Russia cooperation programme and calls for a 'new partnership' with Russia that have been suggested by some EU member states within the framework of the European strategic autonomy initiative. Secondly, it would be reasonable for Estonia to do everything within its power to reconcile any differences between Estonians and Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia. This would leave Russia without its main argument in justifying its aggressive ambitions in neighbouring countries which, as far as Russia is concerned, are fully justified due to the 'unacceptable conditions' for Russian-speaking minorities in those countries and which entail Russia's 'responsibility' for protecting Russian-speaking populations in those countries. Last but not least, although any radical regime shift in Russia is rather unlikely due to the absence of a strong and united opposition and a lack of political alternatives in Russia, Western countries, including Estonia, should also be prepared for such potential developments. Consistent unrest in Russia over the past few years is a clear sign that not all people in Russia welcome the direction in which Vladimir Putin's Russia is currently heading.

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