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Analysis of Securitization of the Baltic States in the Rhetoric of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov

The article aims to reveal the themes, intensity and reasons for the securitization of the Baltic States building on the analysis of the public rhetoric of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in 2008-2017. The current bilateral relations between Russia and the Baltic States happen to be hostile, often involving mutual criticism, aggressive rhetoric from the Russian side, and the security policy of the Baltic States is often seen in Russia as a threat to its national security. The results of this study make it possible to identify the publicly declared interests of Russia and their evolution vis-à-vis the Baltic States and to see the importance of the Baltic States in Russia's common foreign and security policy. The theory of constructivism serves as a theoretical basis for this study. On the basis of this theory, the author has developed a model for the study of the securitization of the Baltic States, which helps to highlight the context in which the Baltic States recur most frequently and to assesses the goals pursued by the securitization of the Baltic States.

Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the security situation in the post-Soviet region continued for some time as considerably tense. Nevertheless, this historical and geopolitical turning point marked both the national renaissance and the spread of democracy across all the independent post-Soviet states, including Russia. At the same time, it was believed that Russia, having chosen the path of liberal democracy, would become a stable and predictable country, capable of ensuring regional security. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has weakened both economically and politically and the country's military power has clearly deteriorated. Both society and political elite were not satisfied with the then situation, and there was a desire to regain the lost greatness of the Soviet times and thus the influence in the international system. Russia's foreign and security policy has

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accordingly become revanchist and retaining and expanding influence in the post-Soviet region, including in the Baltic States, has been at the forefront of Russia's foreign policy objectives.

The foundations for Russia's foreign and security policy today were actually laid back in mid-2003. This was largely reinforced by the positive outcomes of the then Russian President Vladimir Putin's economic reforms. Russia's stronger economy allowed for the growing aspiration to rebuild the historical grandeur of the state and to change the post-1991 image of the weak and diminished state of regional importance. Moreover, changes in Russia's foreign and security policy in particular were greatly impacted by NATO's eastward expansion, which began in 1999 and took off in 2004. The Russian authorities saw this expansion as an attempt by NATO to 'plunder' post-Soviet states from Russia's strategic zone of interest. It is no coincidence that Russia today seeks to achieve that the international community, particularly the major powers, recognize its right to the zone of exclusive interest, referring in the first place to the post-Soviet space.

One of the main goals of Russia's foreign and security policy in its western direction is to change the strategic situation in the Baltic region for its own benefit. To this end, Russia has pursued intensive diplomatic, information, cyber, economic, energy and even military activities of an aggressive nature. Moreover, it has used strong, often aggressive and threatening political statements directed against the Baltic States. It can be claimed that these actions reflect the unchanging attitude of the Russian authorities about the Baltic States belonging to the zone of Russia's exclusive interest.

It should be pointed out that the main documents defining Russia's security and defense policies - the National Security Strategy, the Foreign Policy Concept and the Military Doctrine - do not distinguish the Baltic States as a separate component of the international system. The reason for this could be that, firstly, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are too small to have a real impact on Russia's internal and external political behavior, and secondly, the Baltic States are seen as part of larger multilateral international formations such as the EU, NATO, OSCE or UN. Thus, while Russia is the most important factor for the Baltic States in the formation of foreign, security and defense policies, the Baltic States, as separate elements of the international system, are of little importance to Russia. However, it is very likely that this region is important for Russia in its historical context (as a part of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union) and geostrategic context (as part of NATO and the EU in Russia's neighborhood).

Russia's external and internal threats, like those of any other state, have a relevant impact on the country's foreign and security policy through various

interdependency interactions with country's international relations, national defense capabilities, economy, energy, culture and other areas of dependence. This impact depends on both *de facto* events as well as their biased interpretations (e.g. the interpretation of the risk of a military aggression, likelihood of threats and/or consequences), which are generally formed in a number of different discourses. The formation of a public discourse on security involves different actors (political, academic, societal, military, defense industry, media, etc.). This paper focuses exclusively on the main player in Russia's foreign policy, the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov. The Minister's rhetoric has been chosen as the basis for the analysis of the discourse, given that he is the main communicator from the Russian authority as regards foreign policy. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs designs and delivers country's security policy, possesses specific and sensitive information, has an influence on public opinion and has a certain public trust credit.

The paper aims to reveal the securitization of the Baltic States, its themes, intensity and reasons building on the analysis of the public rhetoric of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in 2008-2017. The results of the study allow to reveal Russian interests and their evolution vis-à-vis the Baltic States and assess the importance of the Baltic States in Russia's common foreign and security policy. Furthermore, this analysis makes it possible to assess the extent to which Russia's main foreign policy objectives reflect in public rhetoric and the role played by the Baltic States in this context. It is assumed that publicly declared policies reflect the priorities of Russia's foreign and security policy and reflect the state's position vis-à-vis other actors of the international system, including the Baltic States.

The theory of constructivism serves as a theoretical basis for this study. This theory was chosen on the basis of a social approach to international relations, explaining that the foreign and security policy of a state depends not so much on the structural externalities of the international system as on the policy-makers. This provides the study with a new perspective on Russia's foreign and security policy-making process and allows it to assess Russia's interest in the Baltic States from the perspective of Russian policymakers.

1. The Concept of Security in the Theory of Constructivism

In constructivism, the idea that reality is socially constructed¹, and that the social world is constructed by individuals or groups of individuals of various social backgrounds should be seen as the key argument. Constructivism thus explains why the interests and preferences of one or more actors may influence a country's foreign and security policy. According to constructivism, the most important element of security appears to be the actor identifying the source of threat and the object of security.² This actor becomes an essential element in constructivism approach-based analysis, i.e. he becomes a securitizing actor. By identifying the source of threat and the object of security, he inevitably turns into a part of his own-formed security. Therefore, it can be argued that threats *per se* are irrelevant to the formation of security policy, as long as a decision-maker or an individual who has an official or unofficial influence on public opinion, does not publicly voice the security issue. From this point of view, it is not so much the analysis of potential threats that matters, but the analysis of their publicity.

Constructivism pays particular attention to identity. Accordingly, the state and its interests are the result of social identity, i.e. interests should not be taken for granted; they are defined in a specific social context. Michael Barnett argues that the perception of security stems not from material factors (power differences between states) but from conceptual and social constructs (different beliefs of states). According to the constructivists, the perception of threats and security depends on the interplay between values, collective ideas, culture and entities³. Following the constructivism logic, it could be argued that the military power of Russia or of the Baltic States is not a source of threat *per se*. The problem is not the imbalance of power between Russia and the Baltic States, but the fact that Russia sees the Baltic States through the relation of the difference and similarity of identity, which is formed by the notion of national idea and by historical context. Thus, building on the constructivism assumptions, it can be held that the conflict of identities forms the interests and preferences of the Russian regime, and consequently the political behavior towards the Baltic States.

¹ Jakniūnaitė, D. (2000) 'Naujausios tendencijos tarptautinių santykių teorijoje: konstruktyvizmas, postmodernizmas ir virtualizmas', *Politologija* 20, pp. 52–88.

² Janeliūnas, T. (2007) *Komunikacinis saugumas*. Vilnius: VU leidykla, pp. 12–13.

³ Agius, Ch. (2013) 'Social Constructivism', in Collins, A., ed., *Contemporary Security Studies*, 3rd edition, Oxford University Press, pp 87–103.

From the perspective of one of the branches of the constructivism paradigm, i.e. the theory of securitization, security is not seen as an independent and self-evident phenomenon, but as the result of a certain social process, where certain problems, concerns, or dangers turn into security concerns. Below, there is a summary of the theory of securitization as provided by researcher Ole Wæver from the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute:

What then is security? With the help of language theory, we can regard “security” as a speech act. In this usage, security is not of interest as a sign that refers to something more real; the utterance itself is the act. By saying it, something is done (as in betting, giving a promise, naming a ship). By uttering “security,” a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it.⁴

Hence, when publicly speaking about events and processes threatening the Russian nation, the Russian Foreign Minister and/or other high-level state officials, securitize them; otherwise said, threatening rhetoric about not necessarily threatening matters will construct security issues. Public identification of a security issue (choice of narrative), intensity of rhetoric (frequency of mention), and level of ‘demonization’ (mention in a negative context) will legitimize political decisions required to address the security issues that have been formed. This means that extraordinary measures that go beyond normal political behavior are allowed to eliminate the constructed security issues. For certain events or processes to be identified as security issues, they first need to be triggered or communicated, to say it otherwise. Accordingly, the nature and level of threats depend on the intensity and negativity of the presentation of one or another narrative (Figure 1). Therefore, it can be argued that the security policy is regulated and depends on the preferences and interests of a securitizing actor. According to researcher Dovilė Jakniūnaitė, ‘there is no point in arguing whether threats were evaluated objectively or not; it is more significant to understand the process of threat construction’⁵.

⁴ Wæver, O. (1995) ‘Securitization and Desecuritization’, in Lipschutz, R., ed., *On Security*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 55.

⁵ Jakniūnaitė, D. (2014) ‘Critical Security Studies in the 21st Century: Any Directions for Lithuanian Security Studies?’, *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review*, 2013–2014, vol. 12, p. 33–52.

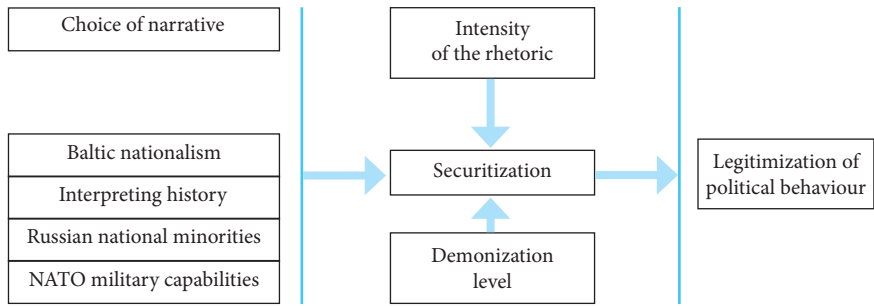


Figure 1. **Securitization mechanism for the Baltic States**⁶

Following the assumptions of the theory of securitization, security policy makers may vary depending on the source of threat and the object of security: interest groups, political leaders, bureaucrats. Security and defense policy at the state level is designed and delivered by the state power, i.e. by the president, the parliament and the government. One of the most important statesmen that have public confidence for the implementation of the state foreign and security policy is the Minister of Foreign Affairs. He may, through his statements and opinions expressed about one or another problem, turn them into a security issue. This would enable to legitimize the solutions needed to address the issue, i.e. to use special measures such as redistribution of state resources or change of political behavior. Therefore, for the purpose of the analysis of the securitization of the Baltic States, this study builds on the analysis of the Russian Foreign Minister's rhetoric.

2. Russian Foreign and Security Policy vis-a-vis the Baltic States

The identification of foreign policy goals and aspirations allows (to a certain extent) predicting a country's behavior internationally, it helps setting political priorities, and provides an insight as to what tools a country can use to achieve its political goals. The analysis and assessment of Russia's foreign policy interests in relation to the Baltic States may lead to a partial prediction of Russia's behavior vis-a-vis this region. However, these predictions should be viewed with caution as the Russian foreign policy has been known as opportunistic, i.e. set to exploit accidentally emerging chances and gain advantage through unexpected (unplanned) solutions.

⁶Prepared by the author.

According to the national security threat assessment by Lithuanian security services, the main objectives of Russia's foreign policy are twofold: (1) restoring superpower status and securing one of the key roles in international politics; (2) regaining total dominance in the post-Soviet space, attributed by Russia to its sphere of exclusive interests⁷. According to political scientist Jakniūnaitė, the attribution of the post-Soviet region and of the Baltic States to itself [Russia] is based not only on historical, but also on geopolitical and economic arguments, as well as on the 'proprietary' perception of these territories⁸. However, the Baltic States are the only post-Soviet countries that have never shown any willingness to join the integration projects proposed by Russia, and were the only ones to become members of the EU and NATO. Russia's political elite is aware of this difference and, as a result, its relations with the Baltic States are different from those with the other post-Soviet states⁹.

The development of Russia's relations with the Baltic States is influenced by several important factors. Firstly, the relative and structural power imbalance between Russia and the Baltic States. Secondly, the separation of the Baltic States from Russia's sphere of influence and becoming part of the West. Thirdly, the geopolitical framework: geographical proximity, economic, energy and socio-cultural links and the historical past. All of these factors reflect the conflict between the identities of the nations, accordingly forming the guidelines for foreign and security policy agendas of both countries.

It can be stated that the current bilateral relations between Russia and the Baltic States happen to be hostile, often involving mutual criticism, aggressive rhetoric from the Russian side, and the security policy of the Baltic States is seen in Russia as a direct threat to its national security. The core challenges in the bilateral relations - military and energy security aspirations of the Baltic States, different interpretation of history, and the situation of Russian-speaking population in the Baltic States - have remained unchanged for many years now, with no attempts being made to address them at the level of bilateral relations. It is notable that most of the problematic aspects of the relations between the Baltic States and Russia are addressed at the level of various international organizations.

Russian political scientist Dmitri Trenin summarized Russia's interests in the Baltic States as follows: Russia tries to prevent the deployment of NATO's infrastructure in the Baltics, it seeks to make Latvia and Estonia lowering the

⁷ State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania and Second Investigation Department under the Ministry of National Defence (2018), *National Security Threat Assessment*, p. 5. Available at <https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ENG.pdf>

⁸ Jakniūnaitė, D. (2013) 'Baltijos valstybės ir Rusija: liminali dvišalių santykių būseną', *Politologija* 3 (71).

⁹ *Ibidem*.

barriers for acquiring citizenship for Russian speakers, and to defend the historical narrative of the Soviet Union's role in liberating Europe from Nazism¹⁰. It can be claimed that Russia's interests in the Baltic States are both bilateral and regional in nature, encompassing the fields of economy, socio-culture, and particularly energy and military security. Given Russia's foreign policy goals, the state of bilateral relations and Russia's interests regarding the Baltic States, it is highly likely that Russia's behavior nationally, regionally and globally will remain aggressive and expansionist in the short term (until the end of the incumbent President of Russia Putin). Russia will continue to seek to increase its influence through confrontational politics and military means.

3. Analysis of Lavrov's Rhetoric

This study focusses on the securitization of the Baltic States, its themes, intensity and reasons, while building on the analysis of the rhetoric of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. To this end, the study employs a quantitative discourse analysis approach enabling the analysis of a large amount of discourse material related to the construction of the identity of the Baltic States in the context of the Russian foreign policy. The data required for the study (Lavrov's public speeches, interviews and articles) have been collected from the official website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹¹. Based on the empirical data collected (sample: 2 911 685 words), the study provides insights and generalizations about the development trend in the securitization of the Baltic States.

Lavrov as a choice for this analysis has resulted from a number of factors: Lavrov is, in the first place, part of the Russian political elite with great influence in designing, organizing, coordinating and delivering country's foreign and security policy; then, Lavrov's rhetoric - in comparison with that of Putin or of Russia's other high level statesmen - gives much more attention to Russia's foreign and security policy vis-à-vis the Baltic States, NATO and the EU.

The analysis spans Lavrov's public rhetoric vis-à-vis the Baltic States over a period of ten years (2008-2017). The choice for this period is based on the following two main reasons: first, the foreign and security policy is better reflected in the long term, and second, it is in 2008 that Russia launched its expansionist policy in practice (Russia's war with Sakartvelo and the official transformation of

¹⁰Trenin, D. (2011) 'Russian Policies toward the Nordic-Baltic Region', in Nurick, R., Nordenman, M., ed., *Nordic-Baltic Security in the 21st Century. The Regional Agenda and the Global Role*, Atlantic Council, p. 47.

¹¹ <http://www.mid.ru>

the Russian armed forces). The analysis of Lavrov's rhetoric uses Lavrov's public statements, interpreting them in the context of the Baltic-Russian relations. The analysis of Lavrov's discourse focuses on the security of the Baltic States. Particular attention in the analysis of Lavrov's discourse is given to the content and expression, i.e. how often and in what context the Baltic countries are mentioned.

In 2008-2017, Lavrov mentioned the words 'Baltic', 'Lithuania', 'Latvia', 'Estonia' in their different grammatical forms 577 times in his official statements (Figure 2). This does not seem as much in the sample of Lavrov's rhetoric, i.e. only 0.2% of the total discourse. Figure 2 shows that the mention of the Baltic States was the scarcest in 2010 and the most frequent in 2012. In 2012, the frequency of mention of the Baltic States increased due to a greater than usual number of bilateral meetings. Although these meetings did not avoid discussing pending issues, a greater number of meetings, nevertheless, demonstrated the improvement in the diplomatic relations at that time. In 2008-2017, the Baltic States as a region (without breaking them down individually) were mentioned 294 times; Lithuania was mentioned 85 times, Latvia - 103 times and Estonia - 95 times. The frequency of mention of all the three countries was quite similar, suggesting that Russia views the Baltic States as a single region. It can be noted however that Latvia and Estonia were mentioned slightly more often than Lithuania, which presumably suggests that there was a greater coincidence of Russia's interests vis-a-vis Latvia and Estonia compared to Lithuania.

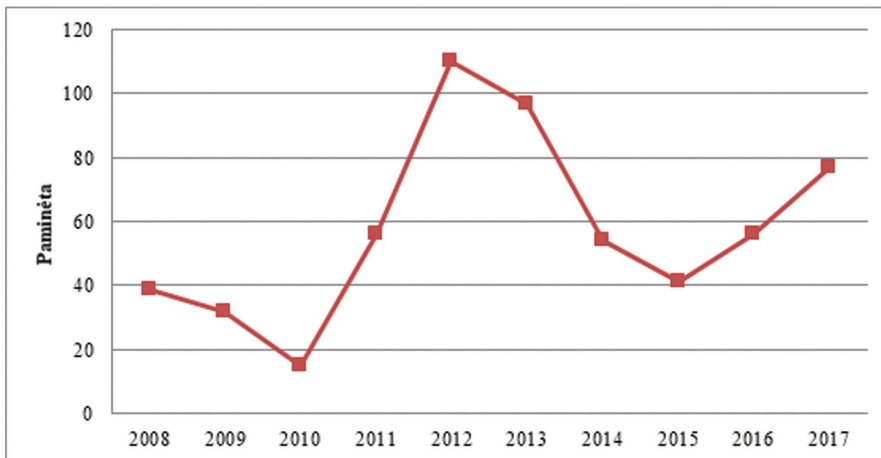


Figure 2. The words 'Baltic', 'Lithuania', 'Latvia' and 'Estonia' mentioned in Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's official statements¹²

¹² Prepared by the author.

Excluding Lavrov's irrelevant, neutral and positive statements about the Baltic States and limiting the sample exclusively to the security discourse, it can be claimed that the securitization of the Baltic States was steadily growing ever since 2009 and reached its peak in 2017 (Figure 3). It is noteworthy that in 2013 the number of negative mentions about the Baltic States decreased significantly (from 15 to 8 times), while the number of neutral and positive mentions increased to 81. The analysis shows that this was mainly due to the fact that Russia chaired the Council of the Baltic Sea States from 1 July 2012 to 30 June 2013. Given the tendency of Lavrov's statements, it could be predicted that the Baltic securitization will continue to grow in the near future, i.e. the number of negative mentions about the Baltic States will grow by about 9% annually.

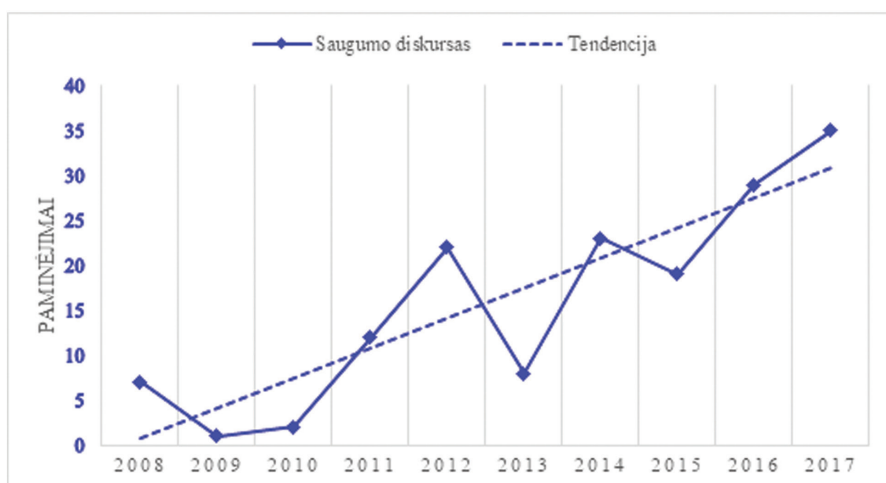


Figure 3. **Lavrov's statements vis-a-vis the Baltic States in the context of security (excluding irrelevant, neutral and positive statements)¹³**

The analysis of Lavrov's discourse suggests that Russia's foreign policy vis-a-vis the Baltic States is rather passive (the Baltic States were very rarely mentioned in comparison with other countries) and negative (approximately one third of the Baltic mentions (158 out of 577) was of negative character). It is notable that the Baltic States were mostly mentioned not in the bilateral but in the multilateral context of NATO, the EU or the Council of the Baltic Sea States. As mentioned above, the analysis of Lavrov's rhetoric also reveals Russia's segmented approach to the Baltic States. It can be noted that the Russian Foreign Minister, when speaking about the Baltic States, quite clearly distinguishes

¹³ Prepared by the author.

Lithuania from Latvia and Estonia. Lithuania was most often referred to as one of the three Baltic States with the most negative disposition towards Russia and the most willing to cooperate with the EU and NATO. In Lavrov's rhetoric, Estonia and Latvia were mostly mentioned as one. When talking about Latvia and Estonia, he mostly focused on the issue of Russian minorities. These two Baltic States were mostly criticized for denying citizenship to the Russian-speaking population. This difference in topics is likely to stem from different distribution of the Russian national minority across the Baltic States: In Latvia, Russians make up about a quarter¹⁴ of the population to compare with only 4.5%¹⁵ in Lithuania. Therefore, based on the results of the analysis it can be stated that Russia does not have a single foreign policy vis-a-vis the Baltic States, as Russia's foreign policy goals vis-a-vis Lithuania differ from those vis-a-vis Latvia and Estonia.

4. Securitization of the Baltic States, its Themes, Intensity and Reasons

Several narratives that are most recurrent in Lavrov's rhetoric may be pointed out: (1) divergent interpretation of Soviet history; (2) Baltic nationalism and the situation of Russian national minority in the Baltic States; (3) increasing NATO military presence at Russia's state border (please find all the themes of securitization in Table 1). By publicly declaring problem areas in the Baltic States, Lavrov consciously and with specific intentions and motives, constructs security issues aimed at specific target audiences. All the above-mentioned narratives could be attributed to the social security sector, i.e. the collective (societal) identity relation between the Baltic States and Russia.

¹⁴ According to 2018 data. The data were obtained from the Central Statistical Database of the Government of Latvia, available at https://data.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/lv/iedz/iedz_iedzrakst/IRG080.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=cd00d9dc-a4e4-4b85-a975-e8b416dee23e According to 2018 data. The data obtained from the Estonian Statistics Department, available at http://pub.stat.ee/px-web.2001/Dialog/varval.asp?ma=PO0222U&ti=POPULATION+BY+SEX%2C+ETHNIC+NATIONALITY+AND+COUNTRY%2C+1+JANUARY%2E+ADMINISTRATIVE+DIVISION+AS+AT+01%2E01%2E2018&path=../I_Databas/Population/01Population_indicators_and_composition/04Population_figure_and_composition/&lang=1

¹⁵ According to 2018 data. Data received from the Lithuanian Department of Statistics, available at <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize/>

Table 1. **Main themes of the securitization of the Baltic States (2008-2017)**¹⁶

Year	Main themes of the securitization of the Baltic States
2008	US plans to deploy anti-missile system (Baltic States (hereinafter 'the BS', Lithuania)
	The situation of Russian national minority (Latvia)
	Interpretation of the historical past
	Neo-Nazi Russophobic movements (Estonia)
2009	Eastern Partnership Initiative (BS)
2010	The situation of Russian national minority (BS, Latvia, Estonia)
	Interpretation of the historical past (BS, Latvia, Estonia)
2011	NATO's plans to defend the Baltic States and Poland (BS)
	Compensation for Soviet occupation (Lithuania)
	Increasing NATO military presence nearby Russia (Lithuania)
	The situation of non-citizen speakers of Russian (Latvia and Estonia)
2012	The situation of non-citizen speakers of Russian (BS, Latvia, Estonia)
	Compensation for Soviet occupation (BS, Lithuania)
	Neo-Nazi Russophobic movements (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia)
2013	NATO military exercise Steadfast Jazz 2013 (BS)
	Neo-Nazi Russophobic movements (Lithuania)
	The situation of non-citizen speakers of Russian (Latvia and Estonia)
2014	Deployment of NATO anti-missile systems (BS)
	The situation of Russian national minority (BS)
	The situation of non-citizen speakers of Russian (BS, Latvia, Estonia)
	Neo-Nazi Russophobic movements (BS)
2015	Increasing NATO military presence nearby Russia (BS)
	The situation of non-citizen speakers of Russian (BS, Latvia, Estonia)
2016	Increasing NATO military presence nearby Russia (BS)
	Neo-Nazi Russophobic movements (Lithuania)
	The situation of non-citizen speakers of Russian (Latvia and Estonia)
2017	Increasing NATO military presence nearby Russia (BS)
	The situation of non-citizen speakers of Russian (BS)
	Neo-Nazi Russophobic movements (Lithuania)
	The discrimination of Russian national minority (Latvia and Estonia)

4.1. Divergent Interpretation of Soviet History

The divergent interpretation of Soviet history, escalating in some cases to an emotional-nostalgic level, is not an unusual leitmotif employed by Lavrov basically for the domestic audience. The Baltic States happened to be part of

¹⁶ Prepared by the author.

the Tsarist Russian Empire for quite a while¹⁷, and then, for most of the 20th century, they were occupied by the Soviet Union¹⁸. The Russian authorities point out on every occasion that the Baltic States did voluntarily join these regimes. In this context, the Baltic States are criticized for two reasons. Firstly, the Baltic States are not grateful for the USSR's liberation of the Baltic States from Nazi oppression, and secondly, the Tsarist and Soviet authorities invested heavily in the region and spared no resources for economic and industrial reconstruction. For these two reasons, Russia's current political elite holds that Russia has the moral and historical right to view the region as its zone of influence. However, when speaking about the liberation of the Baltic States from Nazism, Russian spin doctors tend to forget to mention the subsequent occupation; and to refute the myth of Soviet investment in the Baltic region, we can refer to a study by Latvian researcher Gatis Krūmiņš which confirms that the three Baltic States were donors to the Soviet budget and not its dependents¹⁹.

During the reference period, Lavrov discussed the problem of interpreting the common historical past. He proposed the creation of joint groups of Russian and Baltic historians to refine the common history. Such groups, he said, could be used as platforms to help implement the concept of Russian history policy in the Baltic States. This testifies to Russia's readiness to develop and exploit its soft policy strategic instruments for foreign policy purposes. Although the leaders of the Baltic States repeatedly raised the issue of the recognition of the fact of the Soviet occupation, Lavrov never acknowledged it, again on the basis of a divergent interpretation of the history. It can be argued that the common historical past is undoubtedly a stressful factor in relations between Russia and the Baltic States. Russia constantly accuses the Baltic States of distorting the history. For example, a law passed in Latvia in 2014, providing for a criminal liability for publicly denying, justifying, and grossly diminishing the USSR and Nazi Germany's aggression against the Republic of Latvia, was seen in Russia as a cynical and immoral attempt to distort history²⁰.

Interpreting history is an important political instrument of Russia allowing to mobilize the nation, raise the level of patriotism and justify political

¹⁷ Since the Third Partition of Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795, until the end of World War I in 1918.

¹⁸ The Lithuanian SSR (Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic) - one of the Soviet republics of the Soviet Union, which existed in 1940–1941 and 1944–1990, was founded on the basis of Soviet occupation.

¹⁹ Krūmiņš, G. (2018) 'Soviet Economic Gaslighting of Latvia and the Baltic States', *Defence Strategic Communications*, Volume 4, pp. 71–74.

²⁰ Interfaks-BNS, *Rusijā piktina Latvijas Seimo sprendimas bausti uz viešā SSRS agresijas neigimā*, 17 May 2014. Available at <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/pasaulis/rusija-piktinasi-latvijos-sprendimu-bausti-uz-viesa-ssrs-agresijos-neigima-57-427284>

behavior. Russia's elite authority constantly refers to the past to justify their foreign and security policy. One of the most important historical narratives for predicting Russia's behavior vis-a-vis the Baltic States is nostalgia for the greatness of the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union is presented as the worst tragedy of the twentieth century, at the same time trying to conceal or justify terror, deportations, corruption, torture, imprisonment and murder of opponents and other crimes committed by the Soviet authorities by falsifying historical facts. Lavrov pursues the same line and accuses the Baltic States of misinterpreting history, while providing alternative assessments of events, glossing over Soviet crimes, denying inconvenient historical facts, and forming an alternative history that underpins moral and even legal activities of the foreign policy. All this implies that Russia will not cease to regard the Baltic States as its historical region belonging to the Tsarist Empire and later to the Soviet Union. Therefore, the Baltic States are likely to play an important role in the plan for regaining the greatness of the Soviet Union.

4.2. Baltic Nationalism and the Situation of Russian National Minority in the Baltic States

Russia considers Russian-speaking immigrants to be one of the most important legacies of the Soviet Union, notably in Latvia and Estonia. The rudiments of policymaking for the protection of Russian compatriots go back to the era of Boris Yeltsin's presidency. This political line gained true momentum, however, only during Putin's reign. Several influence-making instruments used by the Russian authorities to protect the Russian national minority living in the post-Soviet region have been identified through the analysis of Lavrov's public statements. First, there is a recurrent narrative about the Baltic States being Russophobic with flourishing nationalism and neo-Nazism. Then, Lavrov uses every opportunity to point out that the Baltic States consistently discriminate against Russian minorities and violate their rights. In his rhetoric, Lavrov often emphasizes that protecting the rights of the compatriots is one of the priorities of Russia's foreign policy. In this way, Russia reaps the multifold benefit: (1) the formation of a loyal Russian diaspora; (2) the promotion of a negative image of the Baltic States; (3) and the construction of *casus belli*.

The analysis of Lavrov's rhetoric has also revealed his preferred attention to the situation of Russian-speakers in Latvia and Estonia compared to Lithuania. This is related to a much larger Russian minority in Latvia and Estonia (25.2% and 24.9% respectively). In Lithuania, this minority accounts for 4.5%

only. According to Lavrov, the conditions of the Russian-speaking population in these countries are not improving, because the political, socio-economic and cultural-linguistic rights of the Russian-speaking population living there continue to be subject of violation. It is worth noting that since 2014, Lavrov's rhetoric about the situation of the Russian minority in the Baltic States has become more intense and harsher. In this context, much more radical statements began to emerge against the Baltic States, particularly against Lithuania. The Baltic States have been publicly branded as Russophobic states favoring nationalistic and neo-Nazi ideas. Furthermore, it is notable that in 2017, Ukraine also recurred in Lavrov's rhetoric when speaking about the Baltic States from a negative chauvinistic perspective. This may mean that Russia thought it would keep Ukraine in its sphere of influence for three years more after the annexation of Crimea, but in 2017, after branding Ukraine as an unfriendly, anti-Russian and pro-Western state, it publicly acknowledged that Ukraine was put on the same list as the Baltic States for its desire to liberate itself from Russia's influence and its choice to pursue western political direction.

Russia has been putting a lot of effort into the promotion of the so-called 'Russian world' (Russ. *Русский мир*) project - a network of organizations responsible for the protection and fostering of the Russian language, education, science and culture outside Russia. The Russian ruling regime has used these organizations to implement its ideological policies and to spread propaganda information in its favor, thereby building a community of loyal compatriots living abroad, and undermining the integration of ethnic communities, as well as creating an illusion (particularly targeting the Russian-speaking audience) that Russia cares for its compatriots. It is clear from Lavrov's remarks that Russia, through various supposedly non-governmental organizations, seeks to form public opinion about Russia's efforts to allegedly apolitically cooperate with the Baltic States in social areas. In this context, the resistance of the Baltic States to the activities of these organizations is presented as a nationalism directed against the Russian national minority.

In his remarks about the Baltic States, Lavrov has emphasized that one of the biggest problems in the bilateral relations with the Baltic States is the situation of non-Russian speakers in the Baltic States. The Russian Foreign Minister has repeatedly stressed that the fact that there is still a category of people as non-citizens in Estonia and Latvia is a disgrace to Europe as a whole. The category of non-citizens in the Baltic States is indeed considerably numerous. For example, in 2017, the number of non-citizens in Latvia was 237 000 (about 12% of the country's population). In this context it is worth mentioning that in the Baltic

States there is a legal possibility for all non-citizens to become citizens of the respective country (to acquire citizenship one has to pass written examinations of language and history). However, not all non-citizens, for some reason, want to acquire the citizenship of their country of residence, for example, they may wish to keep their Russian citizenship. A large group of non-citizens that are not integrated into society poses threat to the national security of the Baltic States, as part of this group (pro-Russian) can be used for various Russian purposes, such as carrying out propaganda, triggering social unrest, supporting Russia's aggressive actions, etc. As regards non-citizens in Latvia and Estonia, Lavrov consistently insists on the need to grant them citizenship according to their place of residence. Through such rhetoric, he seeks: first, to show the international community and compatriots that they care about the Russian national minority; second, to achieve full-fledged integration of Russian compatriots, which would allow pro-Russian citizens to participate in state governance and elections, and would make the diaspora less visible and, consequently, more subject to control.

To obtain a *casus belli* for invading or interfering in the internal affairs of another country, Russia, backed by its sufficient financial, information and organizational resources and its loyal compatriots abroad, can initiate violent provocations in the Baltic States. The only outbreak of such violence in the Baltic States was the 'Bronze Soldier' riot in Tallinn in 2006, when Russia carried out mass cyberattacks and sent inciting agents from Russia. As a result, Russian-speaking communities remain an important source of Russian provocations and of anxiety in the Baltic States.

In conclusion it can be claimed that based on the narrative of the security of Russia's compatriots, Russia can create easily justified reasons for hostile military actions against the Baltic States.

4.3. Increasing NATO Military Presence Nearby Russia

The Baltic States are a recurrent theme in the rhetoric of the Russian Foreign Minister in the context of NATO. This was mainly due to NATO's fifth enlargement in 2004, which opened up the door for seven new European members: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. NATO came physically closer to Russia's borders, and the Baltic States - the only states from the post-Soviet block - separated from Russia's sphere of influence and became part of Western Europe. The current Russian authorities see the integration of the Baltic States into the European Union and NATO as part of the loss of Russian identity in the former buffer zone between the West and the Soviet Union.

In his public remarks, Lavrov mentioned the Baltic States in various NATO-related contexts: discussions on the deployment of anti-missile systems in the Baltic States, the development of NATO defense plans and of NATO military capabilities, and international military exercises. In the beginning of the reference period, Lavrov relatively rarely mentioned the Baltic States in the NATO context. In 2008, the Baltic States came up in the rhetoric in relation to US plans to deploy anti-missile systems in the region. Later, however, the issue was no longer raised in the context of the Baltic States, as the US abandoned its plans to deploy anti-missile systems in the Baltic States. In 2011, Lavrov talked about NATO's plans to defend the Baltic States and expand NATO military presence nearby Russia. This narrative was prompted by the disclosure by a non-profit investigative journalism organization WikiLeaks about decisions taken at the NATO Summit in Lisbon on the defense of the Baltic States and the military threat posed by Russia. In this regard, Lavrov pointed out that NATO was spreading a misleading information as Russia's military doctrine was purely defensive. In doing so, he started constructing an opinion about NATO being hostile towards Russia. In 2013, Lavrov was triggered to bring up the subject of the Baltic States again as a result of NATO military exercise Steadfast Jazz, which was in fact a response to Russia's strategic military exercise Zapad 2013. Lavrov's rhetoric about NATO activities in the Baltic States became much more intensive, harsher and more intimidating ever since 2014. Russia's attention to the Baltic States increased notably after the annexation of Crimea, when Baltic leaders, anxious about the security of their countries, began to seek closer involvement of NATO and particularly US in the regional security. The decisions taken by NATO at the Welsh (2014) and Warsaw (2016) summits on NATO's reassurance, deterrence and defense measures were met by Russia's ruling regime with a particularly harsh criticism. These decisions significantly strengthened the security of the Baltic States, at the same time changing, according to Russia, the balance of power in the region. Lavrov and other high-level Russian officials saw it as an increased threat to Russia's national interests. It is notable that the national military capabilities of the Baltic States, who stepped up the buildup of these capabilities after the annexation of Crimea, were never mentioned in the rhetoric of the Russian Foreign Minister. This aspect was probably not seen as a factor that could have a significant impact on Russia's foreign and security policy. Furthermore, it is worth noting that until 2015, Lavrov declared that Russia did not see NATO as a threat but only as a danger. But in 2016 the rhetoric changed, and Lavrov clearly and unambiguously named NATO's actions as threatening Russia's national security.

Using securitizing rhetoric, Lavrov has constructed the image of a 'Russian fortress' surrounded by NATO. To address this constructed security problem, Russia is legitimizing its political decisions regarding the build-up and use of military power. In this context, it could be argued that rhetorically securitizing NATO Russia would have grounds (political and public support) for military action against the Baltic States.

Conclusions

Carried out on the basic of the principles of the theory of constructivism, the analysis of Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's public rhetoric, demonstrates how the Baltic countries are being moved from the conventional policy agenda to the security policy agenda, i.e. how they are securitized through the act of speech. The outcomes of this analysis help to seek broader goals: to reveal the context in which the Baltic States are mentioned most frequently (to identify the main themes of securitization and frequency of mention), and to clarify the goals pursued in the securitization of the Baltic States (to define the reasons).

The theory of constructivism maintains that the object of securitization is what securitizing actor specifies as one. For this reason, Lavrov's public remarks about the Baltic States as the states that pose threat to the Russian state, nation and national interests construct an object of security. In other words, Lavrov's politicized interpretation of the security environment in the Baltic States socially constructs threats coming from the Baltic States.

Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia occupy a relatively small part in Lavrov's rhetoric. However, Lavrov pays particular attention to the US, NATO and the EU in his speeches. In this context, it is important to note that the Baltic States are members of these organizations and the US is a strategic partner of these countries. Therefore, it can be concluded that in most cases the Baltic States are mentioned indirectly, i.e. as a constituent part of the West. On the one hand, Lavrov's analysis supports the assumptions that Russia attributes the Baltic States to the Western international system. On the other hand, from a socio-cultural and historical perspective, Russia sees these countries as part of Russia's identity.

It can be stated that the themes of Lavrov's rhetoric vis-a-vis the Baltic States during the reference period - divergent interpretation of Soviet history; Baltic nationalism and the situation of Russian national minority in the Baltic States; increasing NATO military presence at Russia's state border - have remained unchanged. Only the level of 'demonization' and frequency of mention differed between these themes. The strong growth of the last two parameters

started in 2014 and reached its peak in 2017. All Lavrov's themes of securitization are constructed on the basis of the difference in identity. Accordingly, Russia's security problems with the Baltic States do not arise from the balance of power, but from different worldview and political visions of the states.

The choice of narratives is determined by several reasons that best reveal through the target audiences of Lavrov's public rhetoric. As regards the Baltic States, the main target audiences are the following three: (1) compatriots living in the Baltic States; (2) Russian citizens living in Russia; (3) Western international community. Messages for compatriots focus on their mobilization and their potential use as influencers and supporting agents. The messages addressed to Russia's population depict the Baltic countries as anti-Russian and chauvinistic, which allows the Russian ruling regime to divert attention away from acute domestic social problems. Furthermore, the identification and 'demonization' of the external enemy unites the nation, helps maintain the popularity of the ruling regime, and legitimizes political behavior. The Russian Foreign Minister's rhetoric aimed at Western audiences accuses the Baltic States mostly for the violation of the rights of the Russian national minority and complain about the growing anti-Russian sentiment in those countries. This allows to divide the EU and NATO Member States and carry out influence operations against the Baltic States with the help of European third countries. In summary of the causality of the choice of the narrative, it may be concluded that the main goals for the securitization of the Baltic States are: restoring, maintaining and strengthening the influence in the post-Soviet region, containing NATO enlargement, notably in the post-Soviet region, and maintaining the status quo of the Russian regime. These goals reflect Russia's current foreign and security policy vis-a-vis the Baltic States.

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