

Foreign Policy Specialization of Small States: Latvia's Engagement in Central Asia

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Abstract: *The paper seeks to develop and explain the concept of small state foreign policy specialization, using the example of the Republic of Latvia and its engagement with the Central Asian countries. Latvia's foreign policy development for the past few years demonstrates an increasing self-assertiveness of the small Baltic state. Since leaving the Soviet Union, Latvia has been seeking to consolidate its position in the Western community of countries, demonstrating that it is a trustworthy partner. Most recent developments in Latvia's foreign policy demonstrate the country's willingness to share the responsibilities within the international system, support its EU and NATO partners, as well as advance its own diplomatic goals. The analysis demonstrates that the European Union is interested in economic, security and political collaboration with the five Central Asian countries, and Latvia has natural advantages in its expertise, know-how and historical positioning towards the region. Unlike larger EU member states, Latvia can be viewed as more understandable and an equal partner in bilateral relations. Latvia has chosen its engagement and support for the Central Asian countries at the EU level because of both a fair solidarity and the efficient use of the limited financial and diplomatic resources that the small country has in its arsenal.*

Keywords: *Small states, European Union, Latvia, Central Asia, Uzbekistan.*

Introduction

International cooperation is essential and inevitable. Although with the help of enhanced connectivity and technology, formerly distant regions have become increasingly more accessible and familiar, facilitators are still necessary. The Republic of Latvia, as a small country, has found its foreign policy specialization in bringing the European Union (EU) closer to Central Asia. Latvia was formerly a member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and is now member of the EU, and thus it has experiences with both political entities. Over the past decade, Latvia has gradually started increasing its role as an expert and facilitator of relationships between the EU and Central Asia. The aim of this paper is to address the motivations of Latvia in bringing both regions together.

From a theoretical perspective, small countries usually seek security by joining international organizations, balancing greater powers, bandwagoning with a great power, following strict neutrality policies, or building alliances. Their ultimate goal is to preserve the geopolitical stability and secure environment needed for economic growth. Latvia's interest to strengthen ties between the EU and Central Asia falls into this conventional view and categorisation, in spite of the regions being geographically distant. The Baltic country is not among the richest in the European Union, it does not have vast economic ventures in Central Asia, and its foreign policy traditionally lacks

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vocal and proactive actions. Therefore, it is apparent that Latvia's interests and foreign policy in Central Asia region extend beyond the conventional scope and practices not just of the country, but also that of majority of small states in general. Latvia designated the Central Asian region to be its foreign policy specialization and sees that as added value to its EU partners and the Western community in general.

This paper utilises document analysis and several interviews with decision-makers to address both the theoretical and practical aspects of the foreign policy approach that Latvia has undertaken in international politics. In the first part, the paper deals with a conceptual discussion of small states and the "foreign policy specialization" aspect of small countries. The second part offers an overview of the foreign policy strategies of Latvia after it regained independence, while the final part consists of an analysis of Latvia's foreign policy towards the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

The Foreign Policy Strategies of a Small State

Small states as a concept exists since the dawn of state-like entities. Since the Melian Dialogue⁴ or the Annals of the Warring States⁵, relations between small and big or weak and powerful political units have challenged the philosophy and theory of international relations. Small states in foreign policy are extensively researched⁶. "However, debates on how to define and categorize small states have played an excessively dominant role in the study of small states for the past 50 years"⁷. Defining smallness is not an easy undertaking as often the terms are politically charged. As small is often associated with weak, countries may try to avoid being classified as small countries, "and yet, we often understand, infer or expect that the behavior among such sovereign states is to be impacted to some degree by their recognition that one is larger or smaller than the other"⁸.

In this regard, small states are often classified by absolute criteria, both quantitative and qualitative, or relative criteria. As for absolute criteria, World Bank for instance defines small countries as countries with a population of less than 1.5 million⁹. Curiously, Estonia falls into category of small state, while Latvia is barely above the mark. Therefore, the relative criteria where a small country simply means a state that has less power than at least one neighboring country¹⁰, fits Latvia and is used in this research.

International Relations scholars of Realist tradition tend to look at larger countries as those that define the global system¹¹. Meanwhile, small states constitute most of the world's countries. Foreign policy of small countries is often perceived from the point of view that they must operate by the rules and in the environment set by powerful countries¹². "Yet the balance of power, realist-based logic is not the ultimate

⁴ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Duke Classics, 2012 [c. 400 BC], p. 448.

⁵ X. Liu, *Strategies of the Warring States: Zhan Guo Ce*, London, DeepLogic, 2019 [500 BC], <https://www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/strategies-of-the-warring-states-zhan-guo-ce> (accessed 30 April 2021).

⁶ See, B. Thorhallsson, 'Studying Small States: A Review', *Small States & Territories*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2018, pp. 17-34.; and O. F. Knudsen, 'Small States, Latent and Extant: Towards a General Perspective', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2002, pp. 182-198.

⁷ G. Baldacchino and A. Wivel, 'Small States: Concepts and Theories', in Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel, *Handbook on the Politics of Small States*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2020, p. 3.

⁸ G. Baldacchino, 'Editorial: Mainstreaming the Study of Small States and Territories', *Small States & Territories Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2018, p. 5.

⁹ World Bank, *The World Bank In Small States*, Washington: World Bank, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/smallstates/overview> (accessed 30 April 2021)

¹⁰ I. B. Neumann and S. Gstohl, 'Introduction. Lilliputians in Gulliver's Word?', in Jessica L. Beyer, Iver B. Neumann and Sijelinde Gstohl, *Small States in International Relations*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006, p. 14.

¹¹ See, for instance, H. J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1948.

¹² A. Baker Fox, *The Power of Small States: Diplomacy in World War II*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959, p. 1.

way of understanding small state foreign policy or in formulating policies that would best serve the interests of small states¹³. The versatility of small countries and the number of combinations for foreign policy strategies that they have in their possession are significant in understanding the international system and interactions between states¹⁴. In the realist tradition of International Relations theory, it is particularly presumed that small countries are interested mostly in security and autonomy, i.e. self-preservation.

David Vital considered that the international system is a class system¹⁵, therefore that small states have to reconsider their situation, role, goals and options on a regular basis¹⁶. It is also traditionally understood that small states tend to keep a low profile in international relations, limit themselves in their geographical scope, express interest in a relatively low number of foreign policy issues, use all their diplomatic and economic instruments to safeguard themselves against military attacks, as well as support multilateralism and international norms¹⁷.

For small countries, the concept of a foreign policy environment is of a particular importance¹⁸. In the case of small countries, the interconnectedness of the foreign policy situation and the imperative of maintaining autonomy, which largely determines the space for manoeuvring, is noticeable. Small states run the risk of financial, technological, as well as cultural and educational stagnation without a free flow of people, goods, and ideas. They rely on the predictability of world politics and international relations to guarantee their own identity and avoid stagnation. Therefore, small states naturally seek not only security and autonomy, but wealth and prestige in foreign policy as well. Wealth, defined in relation to the satisfaction of the needs of capital, technology and education, is essential for long-term survival.

Small states are not interested only in securing their own independence via a bilateral alliance with a great power, an alliance with two or more small countries, a multilateral alliance with multiple great powers, or strict neutrality¹⁹. Olav Knudsen argued that small states located near a great power could choose between an alliance with their more powerful neighbour, an alliance with its main rival, or a more or less well-defended neutrality²⁰. They are also interested in improving their environment by collaborating with other small member states inside and outside formalized or institutionalized networks. Namely, small countries, similarly to great powers, seek to secure their neighbourhood and work with the friendly countries around them to build a buffer-zone. This *Realpolitik* approach is based on the calculation that, being surrounded by friendly and collaborative countries, increases both security and options for growing economic wealth.

Nevertheless, in the modern system, small states have started opting for increasing their economic wealth and prestige by exercising foreign policy in geographically much more distant regions. As expertise and know-how, as well as

¹³ M. Crandall and M. L. Sulg, 'Small States "Thinking Big" in a Multiplex World: Estonia's Foreign Policy', *Small States & Territories*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2020, p. 400.

¹⁴ See, B. Thorhallsson and S. Steinsson, 'Small state foreign policy', in William R. Thompson, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 1.

¹⁵ D. Vital, *The Survival of Small States: Studies in Small Power/Great Power Conflict*, London: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 2.

¹⁶ D. Vital, *The Inequality of States. A Study of the Small Power in International Relations*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980, pp. 110-114.

¹⁷ J. A. K. Hey, 'Introducing Small State Foreign Policy', in J. A. K. Hey, *Small States in World Politics: Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003, p. 5.

¹⁸ See, B. Thorhallsson and A. J. K. Bailes, 'Small State Diplomacy', in C. M. Constantinou, P. Kerr and P. Sharp, *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy*, London: SAGE, 2016, pp. 294-307.

¹⁹ H. Wiberg, 'Security Problems of Small Nations', in W. Bauwens, A. Clesse, and O. F. Knudsen, *Small States and the Security Challenge in the New Europe*, London-Washington: Brassey's, 1996, p. 22.

²⁰ See, O. F. Knudsen, 'The Foreign Policies of the Baltic States: Interwar Years and Restoration', *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1993, pp. 47-72.

diplomatic, business and people-to-people networks, are becoming much more valuable in a globalized world, small countries can start becoming more proficient in certain economic or political sectors. The long-standing tradition of Nordic countries advocating for democratic and human rights principles internationally, Switzerland offering mediation and negotiation platforms, and Luxembourg, Belgium, Austria and Switzerland offering their services in hosting international organizations and institutions provide visible examples of small countries developing a foreign policy specialization.

Hence, this paper argues that Latvia in a very similar manner has been developing and securing expertise in Central Asia and offering assistance in building relations between the EU and Central Asian countries. This hypothesis is supported by the international organizations like the European Union and NATO, which are upholding Latvia's immediate security interests, while expanding a country's international role and specializing in one region would be a logical step towards security interests. Meanwhile, it is not only in the interests of Latvia as a small state to secure its welfare and prestige via facilitating engagement between the EU and Central Asian countries more actively, but it is also part of Latvia's contribution to the role of the EU in the world, the EU as a security actor²¹, and the sustainability of the EU integration model in general. This logic also aligns with theoretical reasoning of Raimo Väyrynen, among others, that international organizations are the best friends to small states, and due to the fact that they sustain international law and nonviolent foreign policy instruments, small states have self-interest in supporting them²².

Even for economically and politically weak small countries, foreign policy strategies include engagement with other similarly sized countries and using international organizations to achieve common goals. Using and facilitating international institutions to achieve disproportional influence on rulemaking in the international system²³ has been a norm in modern international system. For a small state with relatively limited resources, but with contacts and skills in understanding a specific region or issue, the development of a specialisation in foreign policy would be a logical approach for achieving its national interests within the international institution in question, as well as on the particular foreign policy issue. The following section of this article will analyse the evolution of Latvia's foreign policy specialization.

Latvia's Foreign Policy Logic and Evolution

As a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, significant changes took place on the geopolitical map of the world, and several new states were formed in the post-Soviet space. Latvia, like other Baltic countries, faced the problem of searching for, forming and developing relations with other states. After 1991, when Latvia gained independence, the country's government chose to orient towards the West, thus a "Return to the West"²⁴ became the main strategic line in its foreign policy. Latvian foreign policy after regaining independence from the USSR, and hence its autonomy in the international system, has been focused on reintegration with the Western community²⁵.

Joining the European Union and NATO were seen as paramount tasks in

²¹ A. Wivel, 'The Security Challenge of Small EU Member States: Interests, Identity and the Development of the EU as a Security Actor', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2005, pp. 393-412.

²² R. Väyrynen, 'Small States in the New European Context', in W. Bauwens, A. Clesse, and O. F. Knudsen, *Small States and the Security Challenge in the New Europe*, London-Washington: Brassey's, 1996, p. 114.

²³ R. P. Barston, 'Introduction', in R. P. Barston, *The Other Powers: Studies in the Foreign Policies of Small States*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1973, p. 26.

²⁴ E. Tulmets, *Identities and Solidarity in Foreign Policy: East Central Europe and the Eastern Neighbourhood*, Prague: Institute of International Relations, 2012, p. 47.

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 'The Main Directions of Foreign Policy of Latvia until 2005', www.mfa.gov.lv/data/file/1/arp_konc.doc (accessed 30 April 2021).

achieving security, wealth, and prestige in international system since the mid-1990s. After the completion of its initial goals in 2004, Latvia became a Schengen Zone member state at the end of 2007, a Eurozone member state in 2014 and member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2016. Consolidating Latvia's geopolitical situation²⁶, exercising its newly acquired international role, and increasing its foreign policy assertiveness and visibility beyond its traditional borders have been among the priorities of Latvia. Beyond these undertakings, Latvia also started gradually forming a foreign policy specialization in Central Asia.

Latvia's EU accession – a primary interest for a small state in securing wealth – was conducted on a similar timeline but was a much more bureaucratized and reform-oriented process. Namely, Latvia joining the EU referred not only to a foreign policy decision, but also to the post-Soviet transformation and implementation of additional structural changes in politics, economics and related sectors. The transformations envisaged more than “asymmetric integration”²⁷, but a process close to the total adjustment of the country's political and economic systems²⁸, which was pursued beyond Latvia's accession to the EU on 1 May 2004. Following the accession, Latvia was interested in deeper integration into the core of the EU, by joining the most intensive formats of cooperation and the ones that require the greatest delegation of sovereignty, such as Schengen area and especially the Economic and Monetary Union. By doing this, Latvia was aiming at further enhancing its security and access to wealth-increasing resources and economic structures.

The geopolitical implications of Russia's occupation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine determined Latvia to adapt its foreign policy in order to play a more active role in the international system. Additionally, Latvia's six-month presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2015 can be considered the final test of EU membership for the small Baltic country. These events provided a background for Latvia's growing self-confidence not only in the EU policies, but also in the international system. Latvia continues to assure its Western partners – the EU countries, the United States of America and more recently Canada – that it's a trustworthy, reliable, and well-behaved partner.

During the 2015 Presidency of the Council of the EU, Latvia started actively emphasizing collaboration between the EU and Central Asia. The knowledge of the region and the local contacts played a significant role in advancing this region as the country's foreign policy specialization. G. Pastore argues that Latvia could develop Central Asia expertise as a niche in EU's external relations, where it is often perceived as a small state with limited ambitions²⁹. A. Jēkabsons similarly defines Central Asia as a political niche in the European policy of Latvia³⁰. Meanwhile, this article sees the Central Asian expertise as a specialization of Latvia's foreign policy in general development and characteristic, instead as solely a contribution to the EU foreign policy. The EU is not the only international actor interested in Latvia taking leading role in Central Asia. The United States of America perceive Latvian, Estonian, and

²⁶ K. Bukovskis, 'Lettland', in W. Weidenfeld, W. Wessels, *Jahrbuch der Europäischen Integration 2018*, Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 2018, pp. 477-478.

²⁷ F. Schimmelfennig and U. Sedelmeier, 'The Politics of EU Enlargement: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives', in F. Schimmelfennig and U. Sedelmeier, *The Politics of European Union Enlargement. Theoretical Approaches*, London, New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 14.

²⁸ K. Bukovskis and J. Elferte, 'Latvia's Path to the European Union: In-between the Backstage and the Spotlight', in A. Sprūds, D. Potjomkina, V. Šcerbinskis, *The Centenary of Latvia's Foreign Affairs: Tasks and Personalities*, Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2017, pp. 191-211, <http://liia.lv/en/publications/latvijas-arlietu-simgade-darbi-un-personibas-658> (accessed 30 April 2021).

²⁹ G. Pastore, *Leadership through the European Union Council Presidency. Latvia and Central Asia*, Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, http://www.lai.lv/site/docs/Central_Asia_Gunta_Pastore_1.pdf (accessed 30 April 2021).

³⁰ A. Jēkabsons, 'The Baltic states and Central Asia', *EUCAM National Policy Series*, no. 11, 2013, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/162773/National_PB11_BS.pdf (accessed 30 April 2021).

Lithuanian activity in Central Asia as a mechanism for burden sharing in terms of ensuring international stability³¹. Central Asia became a foreign policy specialisation for Latvia, which concentrated diplomatic and political resources to the collaboration with this region, in an attempt to ensure a more proactive role in international system. As F. Bossuyt highlights: "(...) Latvia (...) is arguably the country with the strongest ambition to become more involved in Central Asia, both bilaterally and through the EU"³².

Latvia's Central Asian "Specialization"

This third section deals with the reasoning and motivations behind Latvia's engagement with Central Asian region, and provides examples of bridging between the EU and the respective five states. Central Asian region has been given a special place in Latvia's foreign policy, with regular contacts and sustained interest. In earlier works it has been concluded that "Latvia appears to rely more extensively on the EU level to pursue its goals towards Central Asia and has strong ambitions to multiply its efforts to influence the EU's policy"³³. At the same time, as critically mentioned by one of the interviewed decision makers, Latvia's approach to Central Asia over the years has been rather infrequent and has had a character of multiple campaigns:

"It has been challenging for us to sustainably hold on to the wave of success stories. We have occasional positive rhetoric, but Latvia lacks essential business or geopolitical interests [in the region]."³⁴

This demonstrates that all of the engagement that the country has in the region is based on matter of prestige and burden sharing within the EU.

Aside from Germany, the United Kingdom, and France, the initiatives of other EU countries were rare and not decisive for the general policy of the European Union, focusing predominantly on bilateral economic interests. In 2007, the Council of the European Union adopted the "EU and Central Asia: Strategy for New Partnership"³⁵, which consolidated the common position of the member states of the European Union on a foreign policy strategy for the Central Asian region. It was a follow up to the EU Strategy Paper for 2002-2006 and Indicative Programme 2002-2004 for Central Asia³⁶ and it outlined the EU's collaboration goals and appraised the Central Asian policy agenda, taking into account lessons learned from previous EC support.

The extensive document of 2007 has been revised in 2012 and 2015 and it provides a basis for the development of cooperation and relations between the EU countries and the Central Asian republics in various fields: security (combating terrorism, border protection), economy (energy), education (European education initiative), legislation and rule of law (Rule of Law initiative), and regarding human rights protection³⁷. The 2015 update of the Strategy indicated for each area of cooperation, appropriate

³¹ Authors' interview with Michael H. Haltzel, Senior Fellow at the Johns Hopkins University SAIS, June 2021.

³² F. Bossuyt, 'Central and Eastern European EU Member States' Involvement in the EU's Democracy Promotion in Central Asia', in Benedetta Berti, Kristina Mikulova and Nicu Popescu, *Democratization in EU Foreign Policy: New Member States as Drivers of Democracy Promotion*, London & New York: Routledge, 2015, p. 104.

³³ F. Bossuyt, 'Between national and European foreign policy: the Role of Latvia and Romania in the EU's Policy Towards Central Asia', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2017, p. 15.

³⁴ Authors' anonymous interview with representative No. 1 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, April 2021.

³⁵ Council of the European Union, 'EU and Central Asia: Strategy for New Partnership', 2007, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/st_10113_2007_init_en.pdf (accessed 30 April 2021).

³⁶ European External Action Service, Strategy Paper 2002-2006 & Indicative Programme 2002-2004 for Central Asia, 2002, https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/central_asia/rsp/02_06_en.pdf

³⁷ European External Action Service, 'Progress Report on the Implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia Implementation Review and Outline for Future Orientations', 2012, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/20120628_progress_report_en.pdf (accessed 30 April 2021).

approaches and forms of implementation³⁸.

In June 2017, the EU Foreign Affairs Council noted that:

“The European Union considers the Central Asian countries to be important partners, relations with which should be developed and expanded, and therefore the need to adopt a new foreign policy concept is recognized”³⁹.

The Council emphasized that the old mechanisms and initiatives of interaction in various fields will be preserved as they have proved their effectiveness, especially in the field of education, in the protection of human rights, and in assisting in the development of democratic institutions⁴⁰. The most recent update, from in 2019, resulted in the adoption of a new strategy on Central Asia⁴¹, which continues this approach regarding the preferred areas of cooperation. In its bilateral policies towards Central Asia, Latvia has followed the line adopted at the EU level in its strategic framework of cooperation with the region.

For the European Union, the energy sector remains the most relevant area of cooperation with Central Asia⁴². Another crucial aspect of the European Union's geopolitical interests in Central Asia is the issue of global security and the joint fight against the threats of terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and radical extremism. Another area of EU activity in Central Asia is in the field of transport and infrastructure. Even though at present the level of trade between the European Union and the Central Asian republics is not yet sufficiently developed, it is believed that European businesses have great interest in developing the relevant infrastructure in the region, which will make it possible to potentially bring trade relations to a new level. In addition, the transit potential of the countries of Central Asia is also of interest to European countries, increasingly more to keep Chinese infrastructure interests in check, especially the Belt and Road Initiative.

Meanwhile, Latvia has been building relations with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan since the 1990s, when the first visits to Central Asian countries were organised (with the exception of Kyrgyzstan). Latvia's bilateral relations with each Central Asian country developed differently, but they were quite active in several fields. Here are just a few examples: since the 1990s, Latvian presidents regularly visited Central Asian countries, Uzbek and Kazakh students make up one of the largest groups of foreign students in Latvia; national airline AirBaltic has direct flight connections between Riga and several Central Asian cities, while there are regular transports of goods between Latvia and this region. Furthermore, Latvia supports various regional projects related to such areas as justice and internal affairs, public administration systems, agriculture, citizen involvement in democratic decision-

³⁸ Council of the European Union, 'Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia', 2015, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/st_10191_2015_init_en.pdf (accessed 30 April 2021).

³⁹ T. Kudryavtseva, 'Europe Still Believes that Kyrgyzstan is an Island of Democracy', *24.kg News Agency*, 22 November 2018, https://24.kg/english/101924_Europe_still_believes_that_Kyrgyzstan_is_an_island_of_democracy/ (accessed 30 April 2021).

⁴⁰ High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership', 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf (accessed 30 April 2021).

⁴¹ Council of the European Union, 'Council Conclusions on the New Strategy on Central Asia', 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39778/st10221-en19.pdf> (accessed 30 April 2021).

⁴² Council of the European Union, 'Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia', 2015.

making processes, civil society and education⁴³.

As Central Asia developed economically, Latvian enterprises sought to enter new markets in the region. It is still perceived as potentially profitable market when the countries will eventually open their economies⁴⁴. Latvia has managed to establish a sustained political dialogue and mutually beneficial economic ties, in particular with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the largest countries in the region. An especially active period in the economic collaboration between Latvia and Central Asian countries was in 2010-2013, following the establishment of the Northern Distribution Network for the transit of NATO military supplies to Afghanistan and Latvia. In this particular situation, Latvia's political interests of engaging with the Central Asian region coincided with the interests of the Latvian transit and logistics businesses⁴⁵.

Meanwhile, Latvia's trade relations with the countries remain relatively low. When looking at the 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic also distorted the normality in trade⁴⁶, Latvia's exports to the region were in total 132.53 million euro, which represents approximately 1% of Latvia's total global export, worth almost 13 billion euro. The imports from the five Central Asian countries were even smaller, amounting to only 20.72 million euro compared to almost 16 billion euro worth of Latvia's total imports. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan lead in regard to exports to Latvia, with 55.3 and 56.39 million euro respectively. It is worth noting that two of five countries – Tajikistan and Turkmenistan do not have registered goods in Latvian import statistics altogether. This situation clearly indicates that Central Asia economically is relatively inessential for the Latvian total trade volumes, while remaining important to the particular companies doing business with the respective countries, for instance "Latvian Railway" and "airBaltic" in Kazakhstan, "Lāči", "Pure Chocolate", "Latpower" and others in Uzbekistan⁴⁷. Curiously, it was only after the 2008-2010 economic crisis when Latvian companies started looking more actively for foreign export markets, among others finding place in Central Asian region, including tagging along the official visit of the Latvian President to the Central Asian countries⁴⁸.

Hence, the main reasons for Latvia's collaboration with Central Asia is geopolitical, since, currently, the region is often considered to be important for the world politics on various grounds⁴⁹. Despite the various cross-border threats and challenges in the wider region, Central Asia is also promising from the point of view of the diversification of sources of raw materials (primarily hydrocarbon) for the global economy, thus playing an important role in energy supply diversification plans for European economies. European countries are also paying increasing attention to the Central Asian region because of the need to maintain the rear bases of the NATO stabilization operation in Afghanistan. "The common goal of achieving stability and prosperity through peaceful interaction makes Europe and Central Asia partners in

⁴³ Ministry of the Republic of Latvia, 'Latvia Aims to Improve Border Management in Central Asia', 2016, <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/news/latest-news/49466-latvia-aims-to-improve-border-management-in-central-asia> (accessed 30 April 2021).

⁴⁴ Authors' anonymous interview with representative No. 2 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, April 2021.

⁴⁵ Authors' anonymous interview with representative No. 1 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, April 2021.

⁴⁶ Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 'Foreign trade in goods by partner in 2019', 2021, <https://eksports.csb.gov.lv/lv/years/products/export/2019> (accessed 30 April 2021).

⁴⁷ M. Krautmanis, 'Latvija un Kazahstāna – laika pārbaudi izturējušas attiecības' [Latvia and Kazakhstan – Relations Proven by Time], NRA.lv, 27 December 2018, <https://nra.lv/ekonomika/latvija/267988-latvija-un-kazahstana-laika-parbaudi-izturejusas-attiecibas.htm> (accessed 30 April 2021); and Latvijas Vēstnesis, 'Latvijas uzņēmēji meklē sadarbības partnerus Centrālāzijas reģionā' [Latvian Entrepreneurs Search for Partners in Central Asia], lvportals.lv, 25 March 2015, <https://lvportals.lv/dienaskartiba/269901-latvijas-uznemeji-mekle-sadarbibas-partnerus-centralazijas-reja-2015> (accessed 30 April 2021).

⁴⁸ E. Mudulis, 'Uzņēmēji grib nostiprināties Centrālāzijā' [Businesses Want to Keep Presence in Central Asia], *Dienas Bizness*, 21 June 2013, <https://www.db.lv/zinas/uznemeji-grib-nostiprinaties-centralazija-396137> (accessed 30 April 2021).

⁴⁹ A. Petersen and K. Barysch, *Russia, China And The Geopolitics Of Energy In Central Asia*, London: Centre for European Reform, 2011, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/petersen_cer_eng.pdf (accessed 30 April 2021).

developing cooperation”⁵⁰. The strengthening of the EU’s foreign policy towards the Central Asian states was also determined by the intensification of activities of states such as Russia and China within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, within which the member countries of these organizations began to establish and develop interstate relations, and to integrate and expand interstate cooperation in various fields.

This geopolitical logic of continuous engagement is also motivating Latvia: “We want that the neighbours of our neighbours have stability”⁵¹. Stability in the region and peace among the Central Asian countries is seen as the primary task by the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Latvian Parliament, R. Kols, who even suggests the need for a regional organization among the five countries based on the Baltic experiences with the Baltic Sea Council and Nordic-Baltic cooperation frameworks.

Sharing Latvia’s experiences is based on the country’s credibility in the region, which has a long history and allegedly even sentimental value among the populations of the Central Asian countries. Common history in a single Soviet state for both Latvia and the Central Asian countries has been the basis not only for bilateral relations, but also for maintaining and developing contacts and mutual political and economic engagements and opportunities⁵². The historical dimension of being part of the Soviet occupation stems from the experience of having common economic and state structures, but most importantly from both Latvia and the Central Asian countries being “oppressed nations within the Soviet Union”⁵³. Meanwhile, Latvia nowadays does not want to be associated with the terms “post-Soviet” or “former USSR”, which complicates the “common historical dimension” argument.

Due to this reason, Latvia prefers to concentrate on its EU accession experiences, in particular democratisation and market liberalisation, and promote these processes in the Central Asian countries, beyond the goal of ensuring the internal stability of the region. The challenges of globalisation affect Europe and Central Asia in a similar manner and therefore require their joint solutions, including in the “field of border management, migration, the fight against organized crime and international terrorism, as well as trafficking in people”⁵⁴, drugs and weapons. Latvia’s experience and know-how on these issues is an important contribution in country’s Central Asia engagement portfolio.

Sharing knowledge on transition and good governance is seen as a significant potential area of cooperation, in view of the transition from authoritarian regimes. Facilitating reforms and changing the mindsets is seen as an essential instrument to achieve the democratisation goal in the Central Asian republics. Latvia even seeks to foster a “reform competition” between the five countries in a similar manner to the one between the Baltic states during the EU accession process. Engagement with Central Asian countries is important for Latvia in order to prove that it is able to facilitate reforms in other places in the world:

“Our greatest advantage are the experts who have acquired know-how from experience and not from scientific articles. We understand Soviet culture and mentality. We

⁵⁰ Delegation of the European Union to Kazakhstan, ‘25 Years of European Union - Central Asia Relations: From the Past to the Future’, 2018, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan_en/40314/25%20Years%20of%20European%20Union%20-%20Central%20Asia%20Relations:%20From%20the%20Past%20to%20the%20Future/ (accessed 30 April 2021).

⁵¹ Authors’ interview with Rihards Kols, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia, April 2021.

⁵² A. Jēkabsons, ‘The Baltic states and Central Asia’.

⁵³ Authors’ interview with Rihards Kols, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia, April 2021.

⁵⁴ European Commission, ‘The European Union And Central Asia: the New Partnership in Action’, 2009, https://ec.europa.eu/research/iscp/pdf/policy/2010_strategy_eu_centralasia_en.pdf (accessed 30 April 2021).

understand the corruption mentality that exists in Central Asia. Understand those traditions. Therefore, we can explain also to the EU partners that it is a process and perceptions of populations matter”⁵⁵.

The Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also explain the choice for Central Asia as “foreign policy specialization” based on historical roots and mentality, as well as Russian language skills and especially the experiences with reforms:

“There is a demand among Central Asian societies for higher living standard, and that can be achieved only via reforming their systems. Latvia was building its relations with other EU member states while embracing the liberal system and completing the transition from the Soviet Union, therefore we can be very useful to the Central Asian countries”⁵⁶.

Latvia can be a good example not only in matters of anti-corruption and democratisation process, but among others also in higher education system reforms, on cultural issues, and even to the agricultural sector.

This leads to the next aspect, the Central Asian partners' perceptions of Latvia. The EU's dependence on external energy resources and the need for a diversified energy supply policy to increase energy security also opened up new prospects for cooperation between the EU and Central Asia. In this regard, Latvia, as a member of the EU and NATO, can be a bridge for the development and creation of relations between the EU and Central Asia. Latvia has the preconditions to be an “equal player” with Central Asia, as the size of the population and the size of the economies of the countries are quite comparable. Even former European Union's Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia P. Flor once indicated that the Baltic States see Central Asia as a special partner⁵⁷. Latvia and Central Asian countries are also similar by geographical, cultural and economic aspects as former parts of the USSR, and in general, the Central Asian relations to the Baltic country are more favourable. This is also explained by “a pragmatic approach and respect for regional realities. As a small country, Latvia avoided a paternalistic approach, thereby building confidence among partners from Central Asia”⁵⁸.

The levels of diplomatic interaction and professional collaboration confirm that Central Asia perceive Latvia as a good and trusted partner. From the point of view of the citizens of Central Asia, Latvia and the two other Baltic countries were both geographically and also culturally and economically considered as the most Western parts of the USSR. That fulfils all the prerequisites for full cooperation: firstly, it is possible to speak “on equal terms”, since the size of the population and the size of the economies are quite comparable. Additionally, no one feels that they are in the role of a “little brother”, as is often the case in negotiations with China, the Russian Federation, the United States or Germany. In this regard, the risks of economic pressure are mitigated, while, at the same time, due to a wide range of common problems, there is something that each side can learn from one another⁵⁹.

⁵⁵ Authors' interview with Rihards Kols, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia, April 2021.

⁵⁶ Authors' anonymous interview with representative No. 2 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, April 2021.

⁵⁷ A. Konohovs, ‘ES īpašā sūtne: Baltijas valstis Centrālāzijā uztver kā īpašu partneri’ [EU Special Representative: Baltic States Are Seen as Special Partner in Central Asia], *Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji*, 18 September 2013, <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/es-ipasa-sutne-baltijas-valstis-centralazija-uztver-ka-ipasu-partneri.a65572/> (accessed 30 April 2021)

⁵⁸ G. Pastore, *Leadership through the European Union Council Presidency*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ A. Gussarova and M. Andžāns, ‘No. 11 Economic relations and trade - Analysis of the EU's Comparative Advantages and Central Asian Interests’, *SEnECA - Policy Paper*, no. 12, 2019, https://www.seneca-eu.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/SEnECA_Policy_Paper_12_2019.pdf (accessed 30 April 2021)

Latvia is interesting to partners from Central Asia, although the country has limitations due to its small size. Central Asian countries prefer to discuss important aspects with large EU countries directly, since the European Union is a rather abstract concept in Central Asian societies⁶⁰. Nevertheless, Latvia can step in, because it is easier for the Central Asian countries to communicate with Latvia and be actually understood, in comparison with most of the other EU member states:

“The Baltic countries in Central Asia are not viewed via the EU perspective, but as friendly countries. It is about individual approach and individual trust that we convey. We are being looked at as someone who has no hidden agenda”⁶¹.

The central reason for this privileged relations is that Latvia opened communication channels with the Central Asian countries very early on⁶², which were further intensified since Latvia joined the EU. Latvia significantly strengthened its capacity as a mediator when it took on broader international responsibilities by representing the EU and NATO in the region. Latvian embassies have served as NATO contact points in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. In addition, Latvian experts successfully participate in EU technical assistance programs in Central Asia. Furthermore, in 2015 Latvia saw its Presidency of the Council of the EU as a window of opportunity for promoting Central Asia in the EU⁶³, by setting the inter-regional collaboration as one of its Presidency priorities, demonstrating the eagerness of the country to contribute to the division of labour in the EU.

The European Union partners and the European Commission are also supportive of Latvia’s aspirations for advancing the cooperation with Central Asia:

“When, in 2014, Latvia was defining its priorities for the Presidency of the Council of the EU, it was the European Commission which suggested to take the Central Asian region in combination with the Eastern Partnership priority. And we collaborated very successfully with the European Commission on Central Asia. The countries in the region saw us as a friend, while they were angry with the EU. That allowed to push forward programs that were ‘stuck’, like BOMCA [Border Management Programme in Central Asia] and Central Asia Education Platform”⁶⁴.

During its Presidency, Latvia organised the first reunion of the education ministers of the EU member states and Central Asia, which allowed for a new impetus to the sectoral collaboration, following a standstill period that had lasted for years.

“Other EU member states are counting on the Baltic states to take leadership over the matters in Central Asian region”⁶⁵, and “Both the EU institutions and the member states know that Latvia has interests and capacities in Central Asian region; especially if EU institutions require expertise on the region, Latvia is called upon”⁶⁶. The fact that Latvia’s expertise is noticed by the EU partners and relied upon, is also evident from the fact that the office of the Special Representative for Central Asia, has traditionally both employed and worked with Latvians. Moreover, the Head of EU Delegation to the Republic of Uzbekistan from 2016 until 2020 was Latvian diplomat

⁶⁰ Authors’ anonymous interview with representative No. 1 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, April 2021.

⁶¹ Authors’ interview with Rihards Kols, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia, April 2021.

⁶² Authors’ anonymous interview with representative No. 2 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, April 2021.

⁶³ Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, ‘Working Program of the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union’, 2015, https://eu2015.lv/images/LV_PRES_prog_2015_LV_22jan.pdf (accessed 30 April 2021)

⁶⁴ Authors’ anonymous interview with representative No. 1 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, April 2021.

⁶⁵ Authors’ interview with Rihards Kols, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia, April 2021.

⁶⁶ Authors’ anonymous interview with representative No. 1 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, April 2021.

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Latvia's capabilities to engage Central Asian countries has been noticed also by its strategic partner – the United States of America. The US trusts that Latvia and the other two Baltic states will share their democratisation and state re-building expertise with Eastern Partnership and Central Asian countries. A clear example for Latvian activity are professional training programs for junior and middle level state officials that since 2014 are implemented by Riga Graduate School of Law together with the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁶⁷. One of the most visible instruments for this has been in education and financial support to the professional education programs in Riga for junior and middle level experts and NGO representatives from Central Asian countries. At the same time, it is not only about “targeted education programs”, since Central Asian partners look at the West as an alternative to Russia, which makes Latvia a popular place to study. Since Latvia has actively sought to “export” education to the region, the number of students from Central Asia is one of the highest among foreign students at Latvian universities. Integrating Central Asian youth into Latvian university system is not only about commercial gains to the very universities, but also about international socialization of Central Asian countries and showing that “life can be different”. It has been even suggested that Erasmus+ program should even more actively engage Central Asian youth as it would help with changing the political generations⁶⁸.

Conclusions

Central Asia is a region with great potential for economic growth and security engagement. The region's role in economic relations with Europe and the world will only increase, which is especially true in case of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It is a precious resource base, with qualified labour and historical ties to the Baltic states. Personal contacts have remained since the time of the Soviet Union, and nowadays these contacts should not be underestimated. The use of the Russian language and historical legacies put Latvia and the other two Baltic states in a more advantageous position for understanding the Central Asian countries. Baltic and Central Asian countries possess all the prerequisites for full cooperation, but it should be about the present and about increasing mutual interest.

It is clear that since 1991 the Latvian parliament and the government have shaped the country's foreign policy in such a way as to achieve the fulfilment of all the classical needs of a small state. Membership in military alliances, strategic partnerships with superpowers, and membership in economic and political organizations after securing a return to the international system both *de facto* and *de jure* have been the basis for further advancement of the Latvian foreign policy. These developments include increasing self-awareness and assertiveness in foreign policy and global trade, as well as choosing a foreign policy specialization for the purposes of increasing political prestige and sharing responsibilities as a reliable partner to its EU and NATO partners.

Latvia's rather limited financial and diplomatic resources are a hurdle to being more active in the region, but this did not prevent the country from trying to use these instruments as efficiently as possible. The Latvian experience reveals that foreign policy specialization can be seen as a need to present one's country as an active and engaged partner internationally. Foreign policy specialization also is a natural development for a small country establishing and advancing its position in the international arena. Latvia's foreign policy specialization in Central Asia was among the first visible steps

⁶⁷ Riga Graduate School of Law, 'Intensive Programme in European Law and Economics', 2021, <https://www.rgsl.edu.lv/programmes/intensive-programme> (accessed 30 April 2021)

⁶⁸ Authors' interview with Rihards Kols, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia, April 2021.

of a more proactive foreign policy on international arena. Latvia was evolving from a policy taker to a policy maker in spite of being a small country with limited capacities. By demonstrating credible specialization in the region, the country advanced both its place among the Western partners and boosted a new self-assertive stage in its diplomacy.

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