

## Research Article

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# The U.S. Foreign Policy Towards The Baltic States: The Implications Of Ukraine Crisis

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to discuss the implications of Ukraine crisis to the U.S. foreign policy towards the Baltic States. This paper consists of several parts. To begin with, political discourse of Obama's and Trump's administrations' is analysed. The second part presents an analysis of practical level of U.S. relations with Baltic States during and after Ukraine crisis, focusing on three dimensions: political/diplomatic, military and economic. In the third part of this paper, implications of the Ukrainian crisis on U.S. relations with Baltic States are assessed, comparing trends in official political discourse and practical foreign policy of Baltic States prior to and after the Ukraine crisis.

**Keywords:** United States; Baltic States; Foreign policy; Barack Obama; Ukraine crisis; Russia; Donald Trump.

## 1 Introduction

The Ukraine crisis that started in November 2013 and Russia's annexation of Crimea challenged several basic assumptions that U.S. foreign policy towards Europe was based on: that Europe was secure and that Russia was a partner rather than a threat. As a result, U.S. administrations reconsidered their foreign policy priorities and their strategy towards European countries. The Baltic States that share border with Kaliningrad Oblast, the most militarized zone in Europe that is part of Russia, experienced changes of the U.S. position as well. Since the Ukraine crisis, there have been modifications in the U.S.–Baltic relations in diplomatic, security, economic, and other domains. However, U.S. administrations' foreign policy towards the Baltic States that is applied during and after the Ukraine crisis does not seem to be original in its nature and principles.

This paper argues that as a result of Ukraine crisis, the U.S. relations with the Baltics have come back to the format 'Work for you' that was applied in the foreign policy of George W. Bush administration. To begin with, this study analyses Obama's and Trump's administrations' official discourse regarding Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and focuses on the Baltic States' perception, the administrations' interests in this sub-region, declared foreign-policy instruments, and domains for closer cooperation in it. Then, Obama's and Trump's administrations' practical steps in the region are studied, focusing on diplomatic, security, and economic domains. Finally, the implications of Ukraine crisis on the U.S. relations with Baltic States are assessed.

This paper is based on analysis of primary sources. Though the Baltic States have become a more frequent subject of political discourse and mass media since the Ukraine crisis, still there is little scholarly literature on the subject. Since 2013 the Baltic States were examined by Jeremy W. Lamoreaux (Russia–Baltic relations) (Lamoreaux and Galbreath, 2008), Kristi Raik (EU–Russia relations and the Baltic factor) (Raik, 2016), Arunas Molis (Energy security of the Baltic States) (Molis, 2014), Ieva Karpaviciute (Lithuania–Polish relations) (Karpaviciute, 2014), Luke Coffey (the U.S.–Baltic relations in security domain) (Coffey, 2013), Diana Jurgeleviciute (the U.S.–Lithuanian relations in security domain) (Jurgeleviciute, 2015). The most significant contribution to the Baltic States' foreign policy analysis is a collective publication 'Ambicingas dešimtmetis' (Jakniunaite, 2015). However, the above-mentioned authors do not analyse implications of Ukraine crisis to the U.S.–Baltic relations, and focus on a particular domain in foreign policy of the Baltic States. There are hardly any sources on the U.S.–Baltic relations since 2013 other than official documents and

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analysis provided by mass media and think tanks. Thus, this paper presents the research results based on the analysis of Obama's and Trump's administrations' documents, speeches, and event data sets made by author.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Obama's And Trump's Administrations' Political Discourse On The Baltic States

Analysis of Obama's and Trump's administrations' political discourse on the Baltic States during and after Ukraine crisis aims to answer the question as to whether Obama's and Trump's administrations' political discourse has been confined to general expression of security guarantees and not new in its content or, on the contrary, has expressed new ideas, indicated clear boundaries, that Russia should not overstep, and indicated certain 'sticks' as punitive measures. The results of this part of the research are based on the qualitative document and speech analysis: National Security Strategies, State Of The Union Addresses released from January 20, 2009 to December 2017, as well as speeches and remarks of the U.S. president and the U.S. Secretary of State have been analysed. The political discourse findings, based on the criteria for analysis (Table 1), have been divided into several groups: administrations' perception of the Baltic States; expressed interests in the Baltic States; declared foreign policy instruments in the relations; suggested domains for closer cooperation; mentioned problems; and perception of Russian factor in the U.S. relations with the Baltic States.

**Table 1:** Analysis of Obama's and Trump's Administrations' Political Discourse: Methodology.

Information Sources Analysed <sup>2</sup>	Criteria For Analysis	Focus on Ukraine crisis
National Security Strategies (3)	Perception of the Baltic States	What is the central idea of the rhetoric?
State Of The Union Addresses	U.S. interests in this sub-region	Do U.S. officials repeat the central idea to different audiences?/Is the expressed position consistent?
Speeches and remarks of U.S. president and U.S. Secretary of State	Declared foreign policy instruments	Is the rhetoric new or drawn on traditions?
	Domains for closer cooperation	How do U.S. officials define the situation? How much control over events do they believe they can exert?
	Declared problems	(What problems are recognized?
	Russian factor in U.S. relations with the Baltic States	What options are developed?
		Is the interpretation of the situation changing?)

Source: Made by Author.

### 2.1 Obama's Administrations' Political Discourse on the Baltic States

#### 2.1.1 Perception of the Baltic States

During Ukraine crisis, the Baltic States have been discussed on a higher political level of Obama's administration than prior to the crisis: the U.S. president has referred to the Baltic States in 25 speeches, U.S. Secretary of State in 8 speeches; while prior to the crisis the attention from the U.S. president and U.S. Secretary of State towards the Baltic States has been distributed equally (11 and 16, respectively). Even during the EU Presidency, Lithuania did not receive that much attention from the U.S. president.

<sup>1</sup> The data have been collected and analysed on top U.S. policymakers' engagements in the Baltic states starting with January 20, 2009 (when B. Obama assumed Office) through December 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The data were gathered from official websites of the President of the United States ([www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)) and Secretary of State ([www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov)) using the following keywords: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Baltic.

In Obama's administration's political discourse, the Baltic States have been addressed in both ways: as a unit and as separate actors. However, the Baltic States as a unit has been the dominant narrative in all the occasions, except for bilateral meetings with Lithuania's, Latvia's or Estonia's officials. This trend is not new and represents the traditional narrative in the U.S. political discourse on the Baltic States since it has been used till the end of Cold War. Obama's administration's choice results from a number of factors: common history of the Baltic States, similar foreign policy developments after regaining their independence (priority to Western rather than Eastern policy), security options for the Baltic States. The latter has become even more important since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis. Moreover, addressing the Baltic States as a unit makes them look stronger in European security architecture. Therefore, it is not surprising that Obama's administration has started portraying Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as part of Nordic countries and attributing them to even larger region ('And we are working to do even more. As I announced earlier, the initiative I've proposed to bolster the American military presence in Europe would include additional Air Force units and aircraft for training exercises here in the Nordic-Baltic region') (The American Presidency Project, 2014b).

Consistent perception of the Baltic States has been introduced by the Obama's administration during the Ukraine crisis: the Baltic States have been called 'allies', '(global) partners', 'friends', 'proud democracies', 'strategic partners' (The American Presidency Project, 2014a). The fact worth noticing is that the U.S. officials have referred to the Baltic States in the context of NATO in the majority of cases. It is a very rational choice to underline the difference between the Baltic States and other East European countries in terms of NATO membership and security guarantees provided by alliance in the context of Ukraine crisis.

Similar narrative dominated Obama's administration's political discourse before the Ukraine crisis as well: the Baltic States have been called allies, partners, friends attributing them qualities such as vibrant, positive, dependable, valued, and close. This fact demonstrates that Obama's administration's central idea about the Baltic States has not changed, resulted from traditional perceptions of previous administrations towards the Baltics, and has been repeated various times to different audiences.

In the majority of speeches, significant contribution of the Baltic States to NATO, as well as Lithuania's, Latvia's, and Estonia's active participation in international crises management outside NATO has been underlined. During the Ukraine crisis, the features of the Baltic States' such as strength, their importance, responsibility, leadership, and reliability have been constantly stressed by the U.S. president and the U.S. Secretary of State (U.S. Department of State, 2010). On the one hand, Obama's administration has provided reassurances to the Baltic States (underlining their importance) in this manner. At the same time, the other reason behind this type of rhetoric has been the aim to demonstrate that neither the United States nor NATO would abandon the Baltic States. This trend, which has been visible in the U.S. official political discourse during the Ukraine crisis, is new, untraditional and, thus, indicates Obama's administration's reaction to the security developments in the region. Prior to the Ukraine crisis, the Baltic States were often addressed in the context of NATO; however, Obama's administration has never devoted that much attention to underline that. Despite their small size the Baltic States contribute more than enough to the alliance and are the role models (at least Estonia) for the other NATO members.

The expressed ideas also indicate that Obama's administration has perceived the Baltic States as similar actors: in the official rhetoric of U.S. president and the U.S. Secretary of State Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have been described using the same narratives assigning them qualities such as 'fighting for freedom', 'commitment to meet requirements of NATO', 'democracies' (U.S. Department of State, 2013b). All Baltic States have been praised for taking an active role in NATO, international crisis management, addressing serious security issues despite their small size. It is worth noting that Obama's administration has mentioned small size of the Baltic States, but has not mentioned their limited power capabilities. On the contrary, Obama's administration has underlined the very active role of the Baltic States in international relations. However, despite the same narrative towards the Baltic States, Estonia has stood out in the official rhetoric of the United States. Neither Lithuania nor Latvia have been criticized; however, only Estonia has been mentioned as a role model in NATO (Latvia and Lithuania are referred to very important and valuable allies). Estonia has been described as 'great success story', 'model ally', 'high-tech leader', a country that 'punches above its weight' (U.S. Department of State, 2013a). In the context of Ukraine crisis, Estonian example has served Obama's administration probably not so much for deterrence of Russia from Eastern Europe as for demonstrative instrument to other NATO allies to follow obligations to increase their defence spending. As a result of chosen limited engagement strategy during the second term, Obama's administration was vocal to express concerns that European countries do not spend enough for their defence and rely too much on the United States. Estonia is one of the few European countries that meets the

requirement for 2 percent of GDP for defence. Therefore, Obama's special attention to Estonia (as well as an official visit of Obama in September of 2014) has been a very rational step in the context of Ukraine crisis.

Comparing Obama's administration's position towards Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia prior and during the Ukraine crisis, both similarities and differences have been noticed; therefore, it is rather difficult to assess the implications of Ukraine crisis in this context. On the one hand, Obama's administration has attributed similar achievements to particular Baltic States: Estonia has been associated with achievements in cyber-security, e-governance, technological innovation; Latvia – with love of freedom, entrepreneurial spirit, democracy; Lithuania – with democracy and its promotion outside its borders, active participation in international crises management (within NATO and beyond). On the other hand, however, prior to the Ukraine crisis, none of the Baltic States were distinguished as a role model for the other (as it was with the case of Estonia).

Overall, implications of Ukraine crisis to the Baltic States' portrayal in the political discourse of Obama's administration are mixed. Obama's administration has used traditional narrative of the Baltic States (allies, friends, partners) and has repeated it on different occasions prior to and during the Ukraine crisis. However, at the same time, certain new ideas associated with the Baltic States have been expressed as well: value and contribution for NATO and crises management despite their size, for instance. Thus, Obama's administration has been following traditions, but has introduced some new aspects in the context of Baltic States during the Ukraine crisis. Surprisingly, however, there have been no acknowledgement that Baltic States are threatened in the official rhetoric of Obama's administration.

### **2.1.2 U.S. interests in the Baltic States, declared foreign policy instruments, domains for closer cooperation, and problems**

During the Ukraine crisis, Obama's administration has addressed foreign policy instruments and domains for closer cooperation with the Baltic States. No problems in the U.S.–Baltic relations have been mentioned. The absence of the latter is not a new trend in the U.S. political discourse. Obama's administration as well as previous administrations used to avoid admitting any problematic issues in the U.S.–Baltic relations. On the one hand, this suggests that there have been no problems worth mentioning during the Ukraine crisis. On the other hand, Obama's administration did not show any signs of concern towards the Baltics from 2009 to 2013 either, when high level contacts between the United States and Lithuania were limited as a result of changes in Lithuania's foreign policy. Thus, this has been the traditional and rational U.S. posture towards the Baltic States that Obama's administration followed.

The dominant narrative regarding foreign policy instruments, not surprisingly, has been related with NATO and the U.S. commitment to defend the Baltic States. Both the U.S. president and the U.S. Secretary of State have constantly repeated that the U.S. reaffirmed commitment to Baltic States' defence under the North Atlantic Treaty: the U.S. commitment to Article 5 in the political discourse has been described as 'unwavering', 'unbreakable', 'taken seriously', 'ironclad', 'rock-solid'. Specific military measures taken by the United States to strengthen the security of the Baltics have been described by Obama's administration as well: additional NATO aircraft in the skies of the Baltics, more training and military exercises, rotating additional personnel, updates of NATO's contingency planning. The attention to details indicates Obama's administration's wish to send a message to Russia that the United States is taking commitments to defend the Baltics seriously and, according to the U.S. president, 'is prepared to do more' (The White House, 2014b). Obama's administration has not specified further possible steps, however. The narrative, that have been used by the administration of B. Obama, is not new: George W. Bush also claimed that 'in the face of aggression, the brave people of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia will never again stand alone' (The American Presidency Project, 2002), once he visited Lithuania in 2002.

However, no other U.S. administration has used this narrative in the political discourse more often and has openly related the U.S. commitment to defend the Baltic States with the reaction to Russia's aggression ('That does not mean that Russia can run roughshod over its neighbors' (The American Presidency Project, (2014c)). During the Ukraine crisis, Obama's administration has also returned to the 'Work for you' format: focused on its commitments to the Baltics and gave less attention to the present expectations (other than 2 percent of GDP for defence). On the other hand, the vision of the U.S.–Baltics relations in the military field has been limited to the context of Ukraine crisis; no future projections or expectations for the Baltic States have been given. The other fact worth noting is that Obama's administration has been focusing on the Baltic reassurance measures within the NATO framework, not bilateral reassurance measures.

During the Ukraine crisis, bigger attention to the new possibilities for deeper cooperation has not been provided in Obama's administration's political discourse. The administration has focused only on the Ukraine crisis situation instead. Despite that B. Obama and J. Kerry have addressed other issues than military where the United States and the Baltic States had mutual interests: TTIP, energy security, international crisis management, cyber security. All the Baltic States have been mentioned in the context of TTIP, energy security, and international crisis management; Estonia has been distinguished in case of cyber security. The distinguished domains are not new: all of the above-mentioned domains for cooperation were present in Obama administration's rhetoric before the Ukraine crisis. However, during the Ukraine crisis, the U.S. officials have not discussed such domains for cooperation as building democracy, addressing challenges such as poverty, women rights, strengthening civil society in Eastern Europe that were significant in U.S.–Baltic relations, when Baltic States were chairing EU and other international organizations.

Analysis of Obama's administration's political discourse suggests that the U.S.–Baltic relations have not been upgraded to a new level during the Ukraine crisis. The U.S. officials have focused on the same foreign policy instruments and domains as before; the U.S. initiatives on military domain have received more attention than usual, but, the U.S.–Baltic relations' vision has been limited to the timeframe of Ukraine crisis; far reaching initiatives have not been expressed. On the other hand, Obama's administration has devoted more attention than before to the reassurance of Baltic States and its commitments to collective defence.

Overall, in terms of foreign policy instruments and domains for closer cooperation, Obama's administration has formed and expressed consistent narrative, who's central idea has been that the United States is taking its commitments for the Baltic States defence seriously. This narrative has been based on traditional position of the United States towards the Baltic States; however, Obama's administration has related the narrative with Russia's actions openly (unlike previous U.S. administrations) and has returned to the position 'Work for you'.

### 2.1.3 Russian factor in the U.S. relations with the Baltic States

Obama's administration's political discourse analysis has revealed mixed implications of Ukraine crisis to the U.S.–Baltic relations and the Russian factor. Position on Russia developed by the U.S. president and U.S. Secretary of State has been consistent, more open than before, but not as strong as the Baltic States would have wanted it to be. The U.S. officials has referred to Russia as to an aggressor ('concern over Russia's clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty') (The White House, (2014a), has expressed concern over Russia's actions in the region and drew some lines that Russia should not overstep ('that does not mean that Russia can run roughshod over its neighbours') (The American Presidency Project, (2014c). The U.S. president and the U.S. Secretary of State have been constantly repeating that the U.S. commitment to NATO Article 5 and to mutual defence has not changed and is 'ironclad', have pointed out security measures that have been taken in the region (NATO consultations, contingency plans, strengthening of NATO's Air Policing mission and others). The U.S. officials have openly admitted that the strengthening of NATO's presence in the Baltics, readiness action plan that NATO has been preparing, is a message to Russia and a response to Russian arms' build-up and provocations in the region. Obama's administration has also pointed out that the United States is prepared to do more, however, has not elaborated on that. Thus, the U.S. president and the State Secretary have believed to have full control of the situation.

On the other hand, analysis of the official rhetoric of Obama's administration during the Ukraine crisis indicates that Obama's administration has confirmed reassurance measures for the Baltic States but not deterrence to Russia, since punitive measures have not been indicated in case Russia overstepped set boundaries. Moreover, Obama's administration has pointed out that the United States does not seek conflict with Russia and 'has interest in strong and responsible Russia, not weak one' (The American Presidency Project, (2014c).

Overall, despite the fact that commitment to NATO Article 5 has been underlined and the perception of the United States as the guarantor of the Baltic States' security has been underlined, at the same time the possibility to develop constructive relations with Russia has not been ruled out. Nevertheless, during Ukraine crisis, Obama's administration has started addressing Russia differently as an actor and focused its rhetoric on reassurance measures more than ever before.

Obama's administration's narrative about Russia in the context of the Baltic States has been consistent, based on traditional ideas but with new adjustments since administration's interpretation of security situation in the Eastern



European region has changed. Thus, official rhetoric has been significantly strengthened during the Ukraine crisis, reassurance measures pointed out, and certain lines that Russia should not cross were established – these were new components added to official rhetoric of the United States due to the Ukraine crisis.

## 2.2 Trump's Administrations' Political Discourse on the Baltic States

During Trump's presidency, the Baltic States have been discussed on a lower level in comparison to the beginning of the Ukraine crisis: in 2017 the U.S. president referred to the Baltic States twice (from 13 speech acts), 11 times the Baltic States have been mentioned in political discourse of lower rank U.S. officials. Trump's administration addressed the Baltic States as a unit in most of the cases and, thus, kept traditional narrative of American political discourse.

Trump's administration's expressed perception of the Baltic States has been consistent. The Baltic States have been called friends, partners, and allies. Estonia has been distinguished among the Baltics as one of 5 NATO members that meets NATO's financial obligations (same narrative has been used by B. Obama). Some traditional narratives have been used as well: strong bond between the United States and the Baltic States, similar values, 'devotion to freedom' (The American Presidency Project, 2017a).

Though Trump's administration has not applied Obama's administration's strategy to create the image of strong Baltic States in the context of Russian aggression and Ukraine crisis, it referred to the Baltic States as to active and valuable partners nevertheless: Baltic States' contributions to security operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as participation in the Global Campaign to Defeat ISIS have been highlighted ('contributing mightily to international security') (The American Presidency Project, 2017b).

In 2017, two major topics have dominated Trump's administration's political discourse on the Baltic States: U.S. commitment to the security of the Baltic States and to the collective defence of NATO Allies, and defence spending. On the one hand, Trump's administration has applied the same narrative as Obama's administration and has reaffirmed the United States' commitment ('ironclad commitment') to the Baltic States: 'We are with you. We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – and we always will' (The American Presidency Project, 2017b). On the other hand, Trump's administration has introduced a new trend in the U.S. political discourse after the Ukraine crisis has started: the reciprocity principle in the relations has been highlighted numerous times. Administration's officials declared their expectations about increase in defence spending: 'Every NATO member must renew their commitment to our common defence – and they must renew it now' (The American Presidency Project, 2017b).

Administration's political discourse has rarely gone beyond mentioned topics and rarely referred to future relations between the United States and the Baltic States. In 13 speeches, only once the U.S. officials addressed cooperation domains ('security and defence, trade, entrepreneurship and innovation, and cultural and academic exchanges').

Thus, the presidency of D. Trump during 2017 has not changed the U.S. political discourse patterns set by Obama's administration. Implications of the Ukraine crisis continued throughout the presidency of Trump.

## 3 U.S. Administrations' Engagements With The Baltic States

The analysis of U.S. administrations' practical foreign policy towards the Baltic States aimed to answer the question, whether the Ukraine crisis transformed the U.S.–Baltic relations and elevated them to a higher level in terms of quality of strategic partnership. Constructed event data set has been the main source of information for this part of the paper. Data were gathered from the official websites of the president of the United States ([www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)), Secretary of State ([www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov)), New York Times, Washington Post, *Wallstreet Journal*, and *The Baltic Times*. All information units<sup>3</sup> referring to any type of engagements between the United States and the Baltic States have been included into the event data set. The following keywords have been used: Baltic or Lithuania/Latvia/Estonia or Eastern Europe.

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper information unit is defined as any type of information provided by official websites of President of Lithuania and Speaker of Seimas on the required topic (that is Ukraine). Information units consisted of: speeches, messages of congratulations, condolences, press releases, interviews, data about visits.

Information units referring to various types of engagements with the Baltic States of selected top United States have been turned into the event data set that has the following categories: date of the event (when), event (what happened: who did what to whom and where?), domain of the engagement (diplomatic, economic, military). From 2009 through 2017, a total of 343 suitable articles have been found.

**Table 2:** Analysis of Practical Foreign Policy of U.S. Top Policymakers towards the Baltic States: Methodology.

Event Data set based on:	Domains	Criteria for Analysis
Website of president of the United States	Diplomatic	Applied instruments
Website of Secretary of State of the United States	Military	Intensity of engagements
The Baltic Times	Economic	New type of engagements vs Previously applied types of engagements
		'Work for You' vs 'Work with You'
		Focus on crisis vs Foundations for broader agenda
		Official vs Practical foreign policy

Source: Made by Author.

### 3.1 Obama’s Administration’s Engagements with the Baltic States

Despite fear of the Baltic States’ top policymakers and the popular opinion within society that B. Obama has not been the best president for the Baltic States’ interests, the research suggests otherwise. After B. Obama’s administration announced ‘Pivot to Asia’ in 2012 European leaders voiced concerns that the United States would pull back from Europe. When administration declared ‘Reset policy’ towards Russia, leaders of Eastern European countries sent B. Obama an open letter voicing concerns about ‘the future of the transatlantic relationship as well as the future quality of relations between the United States and the countries of the region’ (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2009). However, B. Obama’s administration’s foreign policy towards the Baltics eventually led to the intensification of bilateral relations in diplomatic, military and economic domains: especially during the second term of B. Obama. One can claim that this was determined by Ukraine crisis.

#### 3.1.1 The U.S.–Baltic Relations in diplomatic domain

Several important segments of the U.S.–Baltic relations’ diplomatic domain have been analysed to reveal implications of Ukraine crisis on these relations: political communication (visits, meetings, phone calls), agenda of visits and meetings, decisions that were made. The research suggests that Obama’s administration’s diplomatic engagements with the Baltic States have been based on the same principles; however, they have been dynamic as well because remarkable changes have been present in them during the Ukraine crisis.

To begin with, political communication (visits and other forms of communication) between the top policymakers of the United States and the Baltic States has become intensive during the Ukraine crisis. The region has been visited by the U.S. president (September of 2014, Estonia), the U.S. vice president (March of 2014, Lithuania), Speaker of the House of Representatives (June of 2015, Lithuania), and delegations of Congress (numerous times). The Baltic States’ officials have maintained active contacts with the U.S. top policymakers as well. For instance, Dalia Grybauskaitė, the president of Lithuania, has had a working visit to the United States (August of 2013), a meeting with B. Obama in the United States (March of 2016). The number of presidential visits has not increased during the Ukraine crisis (one visit of B. Obama before Ukraine crisis, and one visit during the crisis). During his presidency, B. Obama with official visit visited the Baltic States twice. Interesting fact is that both times Estonia was chosen as destination. This suggests that B. Obama’s visit served not only as a sign to express reassurance for the Baltic States, but to underline the importance of appropriate military spending: Estonia is one of a few NATO members that meets obligations to spend 2 percent of GDP for defence.

However, communication with other U.S. top policymakers has intensified and has been diversified: the data indicate that before the Ukraine crisis U.S. political communication with the Baltics has been developed on the U.S. State Secretary level (meetings have been bilateral and multilateral, in NATO, OSCE); while during the Ukraine crisis broader spectrum of U.S. top policymakers has been noticed. Such position of B. Obama's administration, on the one hand, signals about intentions to revive political communication with the Baltics on numerous political levels (Presidential, Governmental, Parliamentary levels) that is one of a key features of a strong strategic partnership. On the other hand, however, one cannot claim that intensity and diversification of diplomatic engagements has elevated the U.S.–Baltic relations to the higher level since this act more likely had to serve as a part of Russia's containment strategy and to draw some boundaries in the region that Russia should not overstep.

Diplomatic decisions regarding the Baltic States, which have been taken during visits and meetings of top policymakers, support the expressed argument as well. Extensive political communication during the Ukraine crisis has not turned into tangible results: decisions that would have strengthened the U.S.–Baltic diplomatic domain of strategic partnership (ensured higher institutionalization of the relations) have not been taken and focused mainly on the Russian factor and military issues. Thus, extensive political communication and the refocusing Obama's administration's political agenda towards the Baltic States have not transformed the U.S.–Baltics relations: no new decisions have been made projecting how the U.S.–Baltic relations might develop beyond the Ukraine crisis in diplomatic domain.

During the Ukraine crisis the diplomatic agenda has been modified as well. Reassurance of security has always been an important part of the U.S.–Baltic agenda. Nevertheless, before the Ukraine crisis conventional security was not the only issue on the agenda: cyberspace issues, promotion of human rights, civil society were an important part of the agenda too. When the Ukraine crisis escalated, however, political agenda has been focused on conventional security and situation in Ukraine and has seemed to have served as the reassurance signal. Thus, the expanded diplomatic agenda, that started being established during the first term of B. Obama, has been abandoned.

In general, during the Ukraine crisis, the agenda of the U.S.–Baltic relations has become the one that the Baltic States would have liked it to be: intensive and focused on conventional security issues. However, this kind of agenda has not elevated the U.S.–Baltic States relations to the higher level, has not expanded the strategic partnership since it became narrow once again (as it was during the presidency of G. W. Bush). In this regard, top policymakers of the Baltic States should focus not only on the short-term interests (as strengthening conventional security, for instance), but on the long time perspective as well. It seems that the Baltic States themselves do not have foreign policy agenda that goes beyond the Ukraine crisis. If they does not make one, they will not use the potential of the Ukraine crisis fully in terms of status seeking. There is a great danger that the Baltic States would be left visible, but not perceived as useful and do gooders.

Overall, in diplomatic domain during the Ukraine crisis, B. Obama's administration applied traditional, not new foreign policy instruments (visits, meetings, agenda setting) towards the Baltic States, but in significantly more intensive way than before. Considering the vulnerability of the Baltic States due to aggressive policy of Russia, one can claim that it has been the appropriate reaction of B. Obama's administration to security situation in the region. However, intensification of diplomatic contacts during the Ukraine crisis has not laid foundations for broader foreign policy agenda for the U.S.–Baltic future relations.

### **3.1.2 The U.S.–Baltic Relations in military domain**

Military domain has always been the strongest dimension of the U.S.–Baltic strategic partnership; however, due to the Ukraine crisis military cooperation between the United States. and the Baltic States has become extensive, new instruments have been introduced in military domain. Analysis of B. Obama's administration's military engagements with the Baltic States focused on several aspects such as military exercises, financing of military domain, decisions about military issues (providing weaponry, deploying troops in the Baltics, for instance) and revealed significant changes in military domain of the U.S.–Baltic's strategic partnership during the Ukraine crisis.

The United States and the Baltic States have overlapping interests and shared goals in military domain. One can claim that the U.S. interests in the security of the Baltic States are based on the obligations to NATO Treaty Article V stating that an attack on one is an attack on all. In response to Russia's aggression and Ukraine crisis B. Obama's administration has extended reassurance measures for the Baltic States. To begin with, the United States deployed



additional U.S. fighter jets in the Baltic States, and U.S. naval vessels to the Black and Baltic Seas (Belkin, Mix, and Woehrel, 2014). During the Ukraine crisis the number of jets in Baltic Air Policing Mission was quadrupled (increased from 4 to 16 jets). United States sent six F-15 fighter jets to join NATO air patrols over the Baltic States (Croft, 2014). B. Obama's administration also briefly deployed several F-22s that are considered to have unprecedented air combat capabilities to Poland and Estonia in 2015. During the Ukraine crisis, the North Atlantic Council approved the Baltic Air Policing mission to be long term (the Baltic Air Policing mission had to end in 2014).

The number of military exercises in the Baltic States and the United States part in them significantly increased during the Ukraine crisis. In 2013, B. Obama's administration cancelled 45 percent of military training events with European partners and allies (Luke Coffey and Daniel Kochis, 2015). Military exercises still took place in the Baltics, but they were modest in comparison to Russia's military drills, for instance, in November 2013, 6,000 strong Steadfast Jazz was held, while in Russia's Zapad 2013, more than 75,000 troops participated (Zdanavicius and Czekaj, 2015). During the Ukraine crisis, however, the decision regarding military exercises has been reconsidered: military exercises Atlantic resolve, Saber Strike (nearly 10,000 service members from 13 states participated in 2016), Flaming Thunder (2015), Iron Sword (2014), Black Arrow (2014) have been organized.

Due to Ukraine crisis, the new initiatives have been introduced to military domain by B. Obama's administration and NATO. In 2014, the U.S. president B. Obama proposed the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) that had to augment U.S. military presence in Europe providing rotating troops in Poland and the Baltic States, as well as military equipment in Eastern Europe. ERI has been provided with 810 million U.S. dollars (Mix, 2015, p. 2-3). Within the NATO framework, Readiness Action Plan (RAP) was established in 2014 Walles summit. RAP had to provide assurance measures for NATO members in Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, in 2015, the United States delivered over 100 pieces of heavy military equipment to the Baltic States to provide them with the ability to 'deter' the perceived threat from Russia (though in 2013, the United States had removed all of its main battle tanks from Europe). Since 2015, the U.S. military vehicles toured Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria as part of a 'temporary rotating battalion' to reassure NATO's most eastern allies against Russian aggression (Wright, 2015). In 2016, it was announced that NATO will be deploying an additional rotating military forces of four battalions of 4,000 troops in Poland and the three Baltic States, according to a report citing US Deputy Secretary of Defence Robert Work (Barnes and Anton Troianovski, 2016). The United States is likely to provide two battalions, while Germany and Britain would likely provide a battalion each. The Baltics repeatedly asked NATO and the United States to permanently deploy up to 5,000 troops as a deterrent. However, top policymakers of NATO members underlined that such an act would breach NATO-Russia Founding Act (1997), which prohibits substantial numbers of combat troops from being permanently stationed on Russia's borders. A new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) capable of deploying within 'a few days' was established within NATO. NATO also opened 6 small new headquarters in Central and Eastern European member countries (NATO Force Integration Unit (NFIU)) (Ministry of National Defence Republic of Lithuania, 2016b). From ERI 33 million USD were appropriated for Lithuanian capability building in 2015 (Ministry of National Defence Republic of Lithuania, 2016a). B. Obama's administration requested \$3.4 billion for the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) for FY2017 that quadruples last year's ERI funding level (The White House, 2016).

On the one hand, B. Obama's administration has strengthened the military dimension of the U.S.-Baltic relations more than any other president since the Cold war. More active U.S.-Baltic relations in military domain has not been a product of the B. Obama's administration's efforts to upgrade strategic partnership with the Baltic States to a higher level, but more like part of the reaction to Russia's aggressive policy during the Ukraine crisis. Moreover, B. Obama's administration's military engagements in the Baltic States reflected 'Work for you' format meaning that foundations for the broader agenda of military cooperation has not been set. Thus, one can claim that military domain has been the most intensive in the U.S.-Baltic relations and has been significantly influenced by Ukraine crisis: B. Obama's military engagements in the Baltic States reflected both, traditional and new instruments applied, 'Work for you' format and implementation of declared policy. On the other hand, however, the fact remains that the requests of the Baltic States have not been fully met and that the Baltic States could not be defended in case of attack. RAND report suggests that the force of about seven brigades (standard brigade consists of approximately 3,200 to 5,500 troops), including three heavy armoured could suffice to prevent the rapid overrun of the Baltic States (Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, 2016).

### 3.1.3 The U.S.–Baltic Relations in economic domain

Economic domain has been the least intensive in the U.S.–Baltic strategic partnership. The composed event data set suggests that during the Ukraine crisis economic engagements between the United States and the Baltic States constituted 3 percent of all engagements. It seems that the Ukraine crisis did not have big impact on the economic relations' intensity between the United States and the Baltic States: before the Ukraine crisis, U.S. economic engagements with the Baltics constituted 8 percent of all engagements.

Nevertheless, one can claim that the implications of Ukraine crisis on the U.S.–Baltic relations' economic domain differ depending on the Baltic country. For instance, according to the data provided by U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, in 2014, the U.S. direct investment position in Estonia decreased by 0.7% from 2013 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2015). While in the case of Lithuania, it decreased by 2.6%. However, the data signals a huge increase in trade turnover between Lithuania and the United States, 67% increase from 2013 to 2014, while in case of Estonia, the increase has not been as significant (LR Prezidentė, 2014). The main factor determining the absence of significant changes in U.S. economic relations with Estonia is the share of market that Russia has in the country. For Latvia and Lithuania, Russia is more important trade partner than for Estonia, which tries to focus its trade on Scandinavian countries. During the Ukraine crisis due to the economic sanctions imposed by Russia Latvians and Lithuanians were forced to look for new markets that resulted in slight increase of economic relations between Latvia, Lithuania and the United States as well.

Another noteworthy achievement in economic domain has been the arrival of the Independence vessel, a floating factory to convert liquefied natural gas into burnable variety, in Lithuania in 2014. American officials described it as 'the strongest signal to break the grip of Russia on energy' (Kanter, 2014). On the one hand, it indicated that energy security issues have become part of the U.S. economic agenda towards the Baltic States. On the other hand, however, the event was conditioned by Russian factor, but not by Ukraine crisis itself since negotiations on the matter had been started before the Ukraine crisis.

It is worth noticing that economic domain was the only one in the U.S.–Baltic relations that reflected 'Work with you' format in the U.S.–Baltic strategic partnership during Ukraine crisis. However, Ukraine crisis itself has not been the determining factor for the issue. Instead, it was Lithuania's presidency of the EU during the second half of 2013. One can claim that, for instance, bilateral U.S.–Lithuanian relations were dominated by economic problematic issues important foremost for the United States: certain EU matters were transferred to the bilateral Lithuania–U.S. relations. Among those to be mentioned are the EU amendments on tobacco directive and EU negotiations with the United States on TTIP. Thus, not only 'Work with you' format has been applied in economic relations, but agenda has been expanded in comparison to prior to the Ukraine crisis. However, the Ukraine crisis was not the deciding factor, but it was the other external factors.

Overall, during the Ukraine crisis, economic domain of the U.S.–Baltic relations remained as the weakest in the strategic partnership, although a slight increase in certain economic indicators has been noticed. However, the most significant issues on economic domain (like broader economic agenda, importance of energy security) have been determined by external factors other than Ukraine crisis. Nevertheless, economic domain has a potential in the U.S.–Baltic relations.

## 3.2 Trump's Administration's Engagements with the Baltic States

The beginning of Trump's presidency caused uncertainty among the Baltic States. As a result of certain Trump's statements during the presidential campaign, traditional US security guarantees for the Baltics seemed questionable. For instance, in July of 2016 once asked if elected president he would defend the Baltic States, Trump answered that it depends (ŪFIšer, 2016). Moreover, Trump openly expressed a wish for closer relations with Russia. U.S. mass media (CNN, The Washington Post) also claimed that Trump shared classified information with the Russian foreign minister and Russian ambassador in 2017.

Conducted research suggests, however, that Trump's administration carried on traditional U.S. policy towards the Baltic States and maintained the same intensity in diplomatic and military relations with the Baltics as Obama's administration did after the Ukraine crisis. In Trump's administration's relations with the Baltic States, diplomatic and military engagements dominated (65 and 23 percent from the whole engagements, respectively). During Trump's presidency, U.S. political communication with the Baltics has remained as intensive as during Obama's presidency

after Ukraine crisis. It has been executed in forms of visits, meetings and phone calls. There have been U.S. officials' visits to the Baltics on Governmental and Parliamentary levels: region has been visited by the U.S. vice president M. Pence (July of 2017), U.S. Secretary of Defense (May of 2017) and U.S. senators. The highest ranking U.S. officials have met with the leaders of the Baltic States in Washington DC and other locations numerous times: U.S. president D. Trump (July of 2017) and U.S. State Secretary (March of 2017). Thus, the highest level political communication has continued throughout Trump's presidency. It has served several purposes. On the one hand, Trump's administration had to reassure the Baltic States that traditional U.S. policy in the region would continue. On the other hand, intensive high-level political communication continued to be part of U.S. strategy towards Russia, demonstrating its interests in the Baltics.

Military dimension of the U.S.–Baltic relations has been inter-related with diplomatic one in 2017. Military issues and reassurance measures often dominated U.S.–Baltic States' officials meetings agenda. Trump's administration, the same as Obama's administration, focused on the Baltic States' security strengthening. However, new developments have been present in the U.S.–Baltics relations' military domain since 2017: Trump's administration has turned from 'Work for You' to 'Work with You' format in military sector. Trump's administration demanded the Baltic States to fulfill their commitments to NATO (in terms of 2 percent spending for defence). In short, Trump's administration continued Obama's policy of active military support for the Baltics after Ukraine crisis but at the same time set certain conditions for these states as a result of Trump's presidential agenda.

Despite the fact that economic issues constituted an important component of Trump's presidential agenda, there has not been a significant progress in the U.S.–Baltics economic relations since 2017. Research suggests that in 2017 U.S.–Baltic relations have not been elevated to the new level. There have been some economic initiatives: for instance, U.S. business delegation visited Lithuania to discuss development of bilateral economic relations in March 2017. However, it is too early to tell whether they have turned into tangible results.

In summary, during Trump's presidency, the dynamics in the U.S.–Baltic relations that started after Ukraine crisis continued: there has been more intensive political communication between the United States and the Baltic States (than prior to Ukraine crisis), openly expressed and executed security guarantees. Trump's administration applied similar foreign policy instruments in relations with the Baltic States; maintained the same level of intensity and type of engagements'. One of few new features in Trump's administration's foreign policy towards the Baltic States have been the return to 'Work for You' format.

## 4 Conclusions: New Dynamics In The U.S.–Baltic Relations During And After The Ukrainian Crisis

The research suggests that the Ukraine crisis has brought new dynamics into the U.S.–Baltics relations: they have become intensive as never before. One cannot say, however, that the U.S.–Baltic relations were at odds before the Ukraine crisis: the relations were correct under the circumstances, but not as intensive as during the presidency of G. W. Bush. The Ukraine crisis has had an impact on both political discourse towards the Baltic States and the implemented foreign policy.

In terms of declared foreign policy towards the Baltic States, the conducted research reveals that:

- official rhetoric of Obama's and Trump's administrations towards the Baltic States has been consistent in terms of perception of the Baltic States, Russia and declared reassurance measures to the Baltic States;
- Obama's and Trump's administrations have demonstrated to be in control of the situation;
- Obama's and Trump's administrations' central idea expressed in the official rhetoric has been to send a clear message to Russia and provide reassurance of the Baltic States strengthening U.S. military presence in the region. This idea has been based on traditional narrative of the United States and not new.

The analysis indicates several implications of Ukraine crisis to Obama's and Trump's administrations' political discourse. First, during and after the Ukraine crisis, the U.S. president and the U.S. Secretary of State devoted significantly bigger attention to the Baltic States. Second, during and after the Ukraine crisis, U.S. initiatives on official level evolved around the expression of commitments to collective security, whereas before the Ukraine crisis a variety of domains for

cooperation were discussed. Third, B. Obama's administration changed the declared perception of Russia naming it an aggressor and gave bigger attention on boundaries that Russia should not overstep.

Another aspect that is very important under current circumstances is the fact that not only official rhetoric determines the final outcome, but foreign policy steps on practical level as well. United States is famous for the usage of mild official rhetoric about Russia's engagement, while implementing Russia's containment at the same time (as it was the case during the presidency of B. Clinton and G. W. Bush). Thus, actions might speak louder than words. Analysis of Obama's and Trump's administrations' practical foreign policy towards the Baltic States during and after the Ukraine crisis suggests that the U.S. engagements in the Baltics were part of Russia's containment strategy and not only reflected U.S. administrations' declared foreign policy, but at times went beyond it (especially, in military domain). U.S. administrations intensified diplomatic domain of strategic partnership with the Baltic States (number of meetings among high rank officials increased), focused agenda on security issues; with practical actions in military domain demonstrated that neither the United States nor NATO would abandon the Baltic States: usage of traditional military measures was intensified (number of military exercises increased, Baltic Air Police mission was strengthened, additional funding was provided for military needs of the region), as well as new military measures were introduced (for instance, rotating troops of the United States and other NATO members, sending military equipment for the Baltic States, establishment of VJTF and others). The unprecedented strengthening of the U.S. military presence in the Baltic States served not only as part of Russia's containment strategy, but as instrument of Russia's deterrence as well. However, one can claim that intensive U.S.–Baltic relations were not turned into tangible results in all the domains of strategic partnership: economic domain, for instance, was still weak enough. The Baltic States have not received everything they requested: the Baltic States asked for permanent deployment of NATO troops, but received rotation of troops instead.

In order to make relations with the United States more productive in the future, the Baltic States should put more efforts to stay on the agenda of the United States. Reports provided by the U.S. institutions name several domains for cooperation that are important for the United States (Iran, Israel-Palestine, ISIS, Arctic etc.). So far, the Baltic States have not expressed an active role in those, except for two: issue of Russia and TTIP (that has been discontinued). It is very much possible that these issues will be on active agenda of the United States only for a limited amount of time. Therefore, the Baltic States should start thinking of new niche roles and create agenda that goes beyond the problem of Ukraine crisis.

Thus, during and after the Ukraine crisis, Obama's and Trump's administrations devoted significantly more attention to the Baltic States, addressed issues that were important to the Baltics, declared and applied specific measures to ensure security of the Baltics, underlined its commitments, aimed to send a clear message to Russia and at the same time did not abandon main principles of its foreign policy (like limited engagement in international crises that are not strategically important to the United States, leading from behind, importance of partners).

However, despite the intensified official rhetoric and practical engagements with the Baltic States in general U.S.–Baltic relations during and after the Ukraine crisis have not been upgraded to the whole new level (in terms of quality and strategic partnership): bilateral relations focused mainly on Ukraine crisis, its challenges, and security guarantees and did not attempt to create a vision of broader cooperation in more domains in the future.

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