Estonia and NATO: A Constructivist View on a National Interest and Alliance Behaviour

By Toomas Riim*

Introduction

After regaining its independence in 1991, Estonia has sought NATO membership as a primary goal for its foreign and security policy - formulated as an ultimate means for securing the national interest of Estonian State in the foreign and security policy discourse. In October 1991, just two months after Estonia regained its independence, the speaker of the Estonian Parliament Ülo Nugis, returning from the session of the North Atlantic Assembly, stated:

Our historical experience has proved that neutrality does not guarantee our security (...) we can guarantee our security through an alliance's collective security arrangement. At present, only such an alliance is NATO¹.

Initially, the pursuit of this goal was claimed to be a response (solution) to the “historical” security threat posed by the Estonia's unstable neighbour – Russia. As Russia was expected to behave as it had been doing during all of its history, the Estonian foreign policy elite faced a problem: How to avoid repeating past mistakes? An Estonian high-ranking officer has put it straightforwardly:

The historical source of threat to our independence has been and will remain Russia with its special interest towards the Baltic region and its great-power politics².

Therefore it seemed logical that Estonia simply had to escape from the vicinity of the “bad” Russia as fast as possible and seek membership in Western security structures. For Estonia, “issues of national sovereignty and distinctiveness, of a complete and irreversible breakaway from their Soviet past, and any possibility of being submerged into a new Russia sphere of influence, have ... become the measure and substance of statehood”³. At the end of 1993, NATO, from its own part, announced the willingness to enlarge, issuing the Partnership for Peace programme (PfP programme). Already in 1999 the first wave of applicants – Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic - were admitted as full members of NATO. At the NATO’s Madrid (1997) and Washington (1999) summits the Baltic States were regarded as potential future member states, who got an

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invitation to NATO in 2002 and a full membership in 2004. While pursuing actively NATO membership, Estonia has done everything to reject or ignore Russia's proposals in the security policy realm (e.g. Russian security guarantees offer in 1997) and has tried to reduce dependence from Russia's economy. On the other hand, Russia has done everything to hinder the Baltic States' entrance to NATO, indicating Russia's geopolitics of spheres of influence which Estonia allegedly feared most.

The Estonian academics from their part tried to conceptualize this situation with the help of the neorealist perspective of the International Relations theory, stipulating that in an anarchical international system especially small states must seek a protection within alliances against a threatening great power. Even if it is not balancing against the strongest actor in the system, it is still in accord with the realist-rationalist ontology of materialism and individualism, where the aim of every state is to enhance its own relative position in an anarchical international system and above all to improve its national security and economic prosperity. But several new approaches – postmodern, cultural and constructivist alike – found it puzzling why after the end of the Cold War, when there was no bipolar confrontation anymore and Soviet threat had gone, many states still wanted to join a military alliance such as NATO. Frank Schimmelfennig studied, for example, why Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries wanted to join NATO and why NATO wanted to expand in the first place. He noted that even if it is understandable rationally why a previously occupied state wants to join a protective alliance, it is much harder to understand the interest or willingness of NATO to admit such states in the face of the disappearance of the former enemy – the Soviet Union.

This suggests that realist approach to IR has some weaknesses in explaining some aspects of the security policies of many Central and Eastern European countries including Estonia. Social constructivism as a new approach in IR theory appeared to address such problems since the beginning of 1990's. Constructivist IR scholars maintain that common identity, rather than shared threat, best explains the post-Cold War alliance policy patterns. According to this, “the pro-Western foreign policy option of the Baltic States can be considered as an institutionalisation of their identification with Western values and norms.” This article suggests that this is not a mere alliance formation between self-interested international actors, but more like a collective identity formation between Estonia and NATO, reflected in the foreign and security

Identity (reflected in a discourse) has either a constraining or enabling effect on states’ policies. On the one hand, Estonia has been transforming its nation-state political identity in such a way that it has enabled to build a collective identity (based on the Western values) with the West/NATO, eventually leading to the full membership in 2004. On the other hand, such a transformed identity has clearly constrained cooperation with Russia in the security realm, although, in order to be a part of this collective “self”, Estonia had to accept Russia's role as a common “other” for the Western collective identity building to succeed, eventually enabling some cooperation within NATO's partnership programmes. However, it cannot be concluded here that Estonia has changed its realist-egoistic security policy rhetoric into a more cooperative security merely because of persuading NATO to accept Estonia as a member. Rather, Estonia's security policy decisions and actions have been constrained on the basis of Western common ideas and practices about the proper behaviour, which were step by step integrated into the Estonian security policy discourse, especially from 1994 onwards. From the constructivist perspective it could be concluded that in case of such a strong identification with NATO “the collective identity led to the threat perception, not the other way around”.

After Estonia became a full member of NATO in 2004, this kind of perception of Russia as not being a Western/European, i.e. “not us”, even strengthened. Russia, on the other hand, had also revealed that its political identity was something different from the West's (as formulated in Russia's security concepts). This kind of identity politics from both sides has hindered a remarkable improvement of Estonian-Russian relations. Here one might conclude that this kind of continuity of perception of Russia as the “other” on the one hand and a continuous enthusiasm to pursue collective identity within NATO on the other hand, shows that identity politics plays equal or even bigger role in Estonian foreign and security policy-making than an instrumental-rational calculation of current threats and mere survival in an anarchical international system. As shown in the empirical part of the article, Estonia’s desire to join NATO has been guided more and more by NATO norms and practices since 1995-1996, having a clear indication that Estonia’s national and security political identity has gone through a complete learning and adaptation process vis-à-vis NATO. This is reflected in the changes in the foreign and security policy discourse, enabling also a membership in NATO. To illustrate this process, several cases (Kosovo crisis 1999, the U.S/NATO campaigns against Taliban
and Iraq) are given as the examples. The article ends with an overview about the prospects of improving the relations between Estonia and Russia as seen from the constructivist perspective.

1. Theoretical background

The changes in the international security political environment since the end of the 1980’s have led to a more chaotic academic world as well, especially when it comes to the analysis and explaining states’ foreign and security policy choices or preferences. The IR field has been “plagued” by an emergence of a myriad of “alternative” or “critical” approaches to the classical understandings of the world politics. States’ actions in the international relations have traditionally been explained by so-called rationalist IR theories such as (neo) realism and neoliberalism. According to realism, states follow national interests and that the most important thing in every state’s national interest is to achieve national security in the sense of protecting state’s territorial integrity, political stability, and economic well being within the anarchical international system. Among this classical framework, there are two typical “paradigms”: neorealism and neoliberalism. Being rational-materialist in its ontology, neorealism sees a new emerging multi-polar world still as a power balancing. What follows is that states change their foreign and security policies according to their national interest defined in instrumental-rational terms of power projection or survival. Neoliberals, on the other hand, emphasize cooperative institution building to prevent new conflicts emerging in an increasingly interdependent world. Since classical IR theories reveal their weaknesses in addressing new phenomena after the end of the Cold War (e.g. NATO enlargement), social constructivists have done a good job in challenging this materialist and rationalist posture about exogenous national interests. They claim that state interests rather evolve from the intersubjective interaction between states and, consequently, are socially constructed. And states behave according to the identities they inscribe for certain international subjects and that those identities may be the source of states’ interests as well. Generally speaking, constructivists “analyse the endogenous determination of interests – how collective actors consider, accept and reject different reasonable ways to conceive and pursue security, prosperity and other goals within the same international context”. Social constructivists hold the idea that “the past, present, and future are socially constructed according to the meanings actors hold about themselves and their world”. Stephen Walt, while comparing different IR theories, also found that “Instead of taking the state for granted and assuming that it simply seeks to survive,
constructivists regard the interests and identities of states as a highly malleable product of specific historical processes... [and] pay close attention to the prevailing discourse(s) in society because discourse reflects and shapes beliefs and interests, and establishes accepted norms of behaviour”15. For example, a constructivist understanding of regimes differs from neoliberal approaches in that it describes regimes as being constituted by shared understandings, rather than a convergence of interests. For constructivism, “interests (and threats to them) are not self-evident derivatives of position, but are shaped (constituted) by identity”16. The role of state officials in expressing state’s security discourse is seen indispensable if one employs discourse analysis in order to see how identities are constructed: “The representations created by state officials make clear both to those officials themselves and to others who and what ‘we’ are, who and what ‘our enemies’ are, in what ways ‘we’ are threatened by ‘them’, and how ‘we’ might best deal with those ‘threats’”17.

The second theme in the constructivist approach is the impact of international norms on state actors. Constructivist must ask here: “How do domestic and international norms of legitimate statehood condition the identity of states and their realms of rightful internal and external conduct?”18 Following this, it can be stated that “the dominance of the West and its international institutions rather than the Russian threat may be the primary reason for the course of the foreign policies by the independent Baltic countries in the post-Cold War world”19, because “the systemic structure comprises shared international (or regional) norms into which states are socialized and these not only constrain their behaviour but also help constitute the identities that motivate their conduct”20 and they “are committed in their decisions to values and norms and choose the appropriate instead of the efficient behavioural option”21.

This account of the theory is a good point of departure for analysing collective identity formation, which is perhaps, something more than just creating collective security among states or actors together with its rational-material and externally given self-interest behind it.

2. NATO's transformation

After the collapse of communism in the Central and Eastern Europe at the end of 1980’s many politicians and academics believed that the U.S. would withdraw from Europe as soon as possible, thus making NATO pointless. Many even argued that NATO had actually lost its raison d’être and should be disbanded. None of these happened. NATO's New Strategic Concept from 1991 states that
“The new environment does not change the purpose or the security functions of the Alliance, but rather underlines their enduring validity” and that “the risks to Allied security that remain are multi-faceted in nature and multi-directional, which makes them hard to predict and assess”\textsuperscript{22}. Risks “may arise from the serious economic, social and political difficulties, including ethnic rivalries and territorial disputes, which are faced by many countries in central and Eastern Europe”. “Study on NATO Enlargement” from 1995 justifies NATO’s “enduring validity” in terms of its “essential role within the developing European Security Architecture”\textsuperscript{23}

A new NATO’s Strategic Concept from 1999 is even more confident about NATO’s validity, especially influenced by Serbia’s ethnic cleansing in Kosovo:

\textit{The last ten years have also seen, however, the appearance of complex new risks to Euro-Atlantic peace and stability, including oppression, ethnic conflict, economic distress, the collapse of political order, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction...The Alliance has an indispensable role to play in consolidating and preserving the positive changes of the recent past, and in meeting current and future security challenges}\textsuperscript{24}.

Other commentators have suggested rather that NATO’s \textit{raison d’être} had changed radically after the Cold War, for example:

\textit{Its founding objectives of defending Europe and counterbalancing the Soviet bloc largely obsolete with the end of the Cold War, NATO has come to represent an identity as much as a military alliance. For the nations of Eastern Europe, NATO's role as the “yardstick for Westernization” has been highlighted, and NATO membership has thus become the ultimate goal of nearly every former Warsaw Pact state}\textsuperscript{25}.

The fundamental transformation has occurred from a defensive military alliance into some kind of peace-keeping organization and an exporter of western liberal values around the world. According to the NATO’s basic documents (e.g. “New Strategic Concept” of 1991, the “Study on NATO Enlargement” of 1995 and “Alliance's New Strategic Concept” of 1999), the overall idea of NATO’s continued existence is now a preservation of the Western values and norms (democracy, liberalism, rule of law), with the aim at reducing instability everywhere in Europe. The adherence to the same values will be expected from any potential new member state as well\textsuperscript{26}. Estonia declared that it shared these values and, consequently, was entitled to become a new NATO member even if being small and politico-militarily weak. In the next section it will be shown how
these norms have been internalized by Estonian foreign and security policy discourse.

3. Estonian foreign and security policy discourse towards NATO

By examining the changes in the Estonia’s security policy discourse since 1991, it will be shown how Estonian foreign and security policy elite have perceived NATO since 1991 and what kind of influence might NATO's norms and practices have had on Estonian foreign and security policy, especially vis-à-vis NATO and Russia, eventually leading to collective identity building between Estonia and NATO. Estonia’s positive identification with NATO has been present in the Estonian security discourse ever since Estonia restored its independence. Initially, it was hoped that NATO would provide a security umbrella against a highly perceived Russian threat, as voiced out in the next statement:

But in Estonia, security goes far beyond the abstract, far beyond a future theoretical consideration, for us, it is an acutely tangible concern here and now. It is a fact - foreign occupation troops remain on our soil. It is a fact - the number of fully trained and de-mobilized troops from the former Soviet armed forces in our country – some 10,000 or so - is five times the size of our fledgling and poorly-equipped defence forces, not to mention that Russian fighter planes need but 17 minutes to reach Tallinn from take off in locations within the Leningrad oblast. In short, for us, security is an immediate concern27.

Generally speaking, the aim of Estonian foreign and security policy was - with the help of NATO - to balance against Russian geopolitical domination and its hostile ambitions. Estonian foreign and security policy makers apparently relied on Article 5 commitments in The North Atlantic Treaty, which states the following:

The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area28.

Against any kind of expectations, NATO was not in a hurry to admit Estonia as a full member, issuing instead the Partnership for Peace Programme which did
not contain any security guarantees for the participants. Estonia still considered PfP as a vehicle for the future membership in NATO:

Estonia's objective is to become a full member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and of the Western European Union (WEU). Cooperation with both of these defence organisations is the main political and practical vehicle by which Estonia can develop and strengthen its security and national defence. Therefore, Estonia considers it very important to participate in the NATO "Partnership for Peace" (PfP) program and to actively employ opportunities arising from associated partner status in the WEU.

This heralded the gradual change in the security discourse of Estonia as well. As long as the Russian troops were withdrawn in August 1994, the “immediate Russian threat” seemed to fade away from the discourse, and the policy of “positive engagement” with Russia was announced:

Right now, both we and Russia enjoy an historic opportunity to improve relations. The potential of goodwill is in the air, and it is our duty, on both sides of Tartu Peace, to seize the moment and make that peace again. We might call this a policy of Positive Engagement. This would involve, among other qualities, mutual respect for sovereignty, mutual respect for national security interests, mutual refrain from verbal and other confrontation, mutual respect for international norms of behaviour, most importantly in the area of human rights.

Step by step the new role of NATO as “an instrument for protecting the democratic way of life” appeared into the Estonian security discourse already at the end of 1994:

Still, we are often asked the question, "Why do you still want to join NATO?" The answer is simple. We are convinced that NATO is the international organization which can project stability, a stability necessary to all countries of the continent. Despite some internal differences from time to time, we believe NATO is a relatively stable mechanism in a Europe where uncertainty runs rampant and crises too often break out. Often we hear the phrase that NATO is an outdated instrument of the Cold War. I do not agree. All along, NATO has been rather an instrument for protecting the democratic way of life. For this very reason, eventual accession to NATO is a strategic goal of my Government.

Even if Estonia was still attracted by NATO's Article 5 security guarantees, which was believed to be the most important reason to join NATO in the formative years of the newly born Estonian state, since 1994-1995 Western
democratic and liberal values gained more prominence over “hard” security guarantees.

Over time, the words like “geopolitics”, “aggressive imperial aspirations”, “Russian threat” etc were dropped from the security discourse at all. The main theme was now NATO’s common values, which Estonia definitely supposed to share:

First, the backbone of NATO is formed from the common values – peace, freedom, democracy and welfare – which Estonia values above all and which the European Union has made its watchword. NATO was created to jointly defend these common values. Estonia shares these values and therefore sees its future as a full member of NATO, not only as a consumer but also as a producer of security... We believe that all of Europe deserves a lasting and secure peace, and that precisely NATO, in its proven efficiency, relinquishing its cold war role and concentrating on the basic functions mentioned above, can guarantee such a lasting peace. Hence Estonia too must move towards NATO and cooperate with it as closely as possible.

The former Estonian foreign minister Toomas Hendrik Ilves’ speeches are the best example of the learning process, which Estonia has gone through since regaining its independence in 1991. There has occurred a turn from the threat balancing rhetoric to a more idealistic, moralistic or even naïve perception of NATO’s role in an international and European politics:

Thus Baltic membership in NATO is the best means to signal to western, eastern and central Europe that the Cold War is truly over. It will signal that we have made a jump into a new age that no-one would have believed in but 10 years ago, into an age where dividing lines, whether old or new, no longer exist. We in Estonia certainly do not believe in these dividing lines and that is one of the major reasons why we have applied for full NATO membership.

In 2001, the same nice and polished language has been integrated into a new security policy concept, where NATO is not seen anymore as a sort of protector of Estonia’s independence against immediate external threat, but rather as a whole social mechanism for achieving democracy and stability: “Estonia’s goal of joining NATO is founded upon the conviction that full integration is the best way to protect and consolidate the modern democratic state.”

This new security policy concept shows most clearly how the posture of democratic values (which is the heart of NATO’s continued existence as well) has already been interpreted in terms of Estonia’s national interest, i.e. new value
which must be protected, not so much Estonia's own nation-state physical security:

*It is in Estonia’s national interest to participate in international co-operation in order to further reinforce the security environment. This assumes that Estonia will defend and unequivocally support democratic values at home as well as abroad.*

The following conclusions may be drawn from this: Estonia regards NATO as a very important thing despite even a diminished Russian threat. In 1991-1994 NATO was regarded as the only capable organization of protecting states’ national security in terms of physical existence. Since 1994 NATO’s importance lays in its protection of the values of democracy, market economy and the rule of law, which Estonia said it was willing to share. The breaking point in this process might be the years 1994-1995, when, after the withdrawal of Russian troops, the security political environment was assessed by Estonian security policy discourse more as “all-European”.

Thus, a positive identification was in place ever since, although based on the different grounds if we compare the two distinct periods 1991-1994 and 1994-onwards. But collective identity needs, in order to be sustained over time, a sort of common “other”, which could in some ways be interpreted as threatening to the collective “self”. Estonia’s and NATO’s security discourses were quite far from each other with respect to Russia during the years immediately after the Estonia’s restoration of independence. Initially, while Estonia talked about survival, geopolitics and Russian threat, NATO already talked about European and Western values, the threats or risks which “are difficult to predict and assess”, and regarded Russia as a powerful nuclear state together with its essential role to play in “European Security Architecture”. There was not so much to share between Estonia and NATO at that time. Nevertheless, there was a clearly visible trend that Estonia had been harmonizing its security political discourse more and more with that of NATO’s. This most clearly indicates the constructivists' premise of identity as a basis of state interests, hence foreign and security policy.

Good examples for supporting this thesis are the cases of Kosovo crisis in 1999, the campaign against Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraqi crisis in 2003, which will be elaborated in a more detail in the next section.
4. The cases of Kosovo 1999, Afghanistan 2001 and Iraq 2003

The aim of this section is to give some examples of the cases where NATO's norms and practices influenced most directly foreign policy decision-making in Estonia. In Kosovo 1999, NATO used its military force against a sovereign state for the first time, aiming at protecting human rights of Albanians against Yugoslavian Federal authorities. A fact sheet released by the US State Department in the beginning of bombing in Kosovo described the US objectives in Kosovo as follows:

*The U.S. and NATO objectives in Kosovo are to stop the killing and achieve a durable peace that prevents further repression and provides for democratic self-government for the Kosovar people. We have three strong interests at stake in the Kosovo conflict: averting a humanitarian catastrophe; preserving stability in a key part of Europe, and maintaining the credibility of NATO... Second, instability in Kosovo directly threatens peace in the Balkan and the stability of Europe. No one should forget that World War I began in this tinderbox. If actions are not taken to stop this conflict now, it will spread and both the cost and risk will be substantially greater.*

Ever since NATO started its air attacks, the Kosovo case figured in almost every speech or statement of the Estonian MFA officials at that time. Those statements showed how well were NATO's security discourse adopted by Estonian officials, helping them to assess any new situation and take the appropriate action. It was not surprising that Estonia supported the bombing campaign, with arguments stretching from the human catastrophe to the need to share responsibility in integrating Europe. Following statements serve as good examples:

*Military action taken by NATO was deemed inevitable in order to stop violence against the civil population in Kosovo and to avoid a military escalation of the conflict. The crisis in Kosovo is turning into a human catastrophe and its continuation may destabilise the situation in the region, thereby endangering the greater European security.*

*As Kosovo demonstrates, no single country or region in Europe can meet post-Cold War security challenges alone. All nineteen NATO members agreed that action was necessary. All aspirant states have lent their political and practical support. Estonia is giving aid, will take refugees and contribute peacekeeping forces when a peace is secured. Sharing the burden of responsibility and risk is the only way to maintain stability.*

Constructivist theory suggests here the importance of NATO norms and socialization with these by international community, especially by those countries who aspired for the NATO membership. The socialization effects are
most clearly expressed in the statements made by then the Estonian minister of foreign affairs, Mr. Ilves, who suggested an almost automatic adoption of NATO norms on subject matter, since this was considered the only appropriate or knowledgeable behaviour for a state that wants to join NATO and the EU, no matter the costs or other rational-material considerations.

The 2001 September events in the USA and the following U.S. attack against Taliban regime in Afghanistan reflect the same kind of normative pressure to act and bandwagoning tendencies among "international society". Estonia, of course, followed the same logic of appropriateness as it did during the Kosovo Crisis. Estonia completely supported the NATO's statements concerning US actions against Afghanistan:

_Estonia supports the statement of North Atlantic Council of September 12, 2001, that condemns the appalling attacks perpetrated against the United States of America and regards this an action covered by Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty...Estonia as a candidate country for NATO membership, associates itself with the message contained in the statement and is prepared to provide the United States with any assistance within the scope of its capabilities. Estonia condemns all forms of terrorism and considers it a serious threat to peace and stability. Estonia stands ready to co-operate in the fight against terrorism in any possible way._

Kosovo and Afghanistan cases show how far a collective identity formation can proceed. Considering Yugoslavia as an enemy, Estonia showed most clearly that NATO's norms, values had been made a part of Estonia's identity as well. Russian threat was denied and instead new threats were emphasized. The same applies to Taliban and Al-Qaeda, which were considered most important threats to Estonia today. Theoretically, new threats or “enemies” or “others” are desperately needed for a collective identity to sustain over time, and that the threats must be “common” or “shared”. Since 1994 Estonian foreign policy-makers had realised that NATO did not emphasize the geopolitical or military threat posed by Russia, but rather threats posed by non-democratic elements like tyrannies and terrorists in Europe and anywhere in the world. Estonia just had to adjust its language to the one of NATO, logically expecting that it might facilitate joining NATO as well.

Denying Russian threat, Estonia is now concerned about fighting for democracy everywhere in the world, especially where NATO is involved. Estonia's condemnation of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and, hence, active participation
in the military mission in Iraq indicated the adoption of the norms of the new collective “self”. For these reasons, Estonia also participated in the so-called “Vilnius Group of 10” statement on Iraq in March 2003:

*Our countries understand the dangers posed by tyranny and the special responsibility of democracies to defend our shared values. The trans-Atlantic community, of which we are a part, must stand together to face the threat posed by the nexus of terrorism and dictators with weapons of mass destruction*.

Many Estonian politicians share the view that participation in these missions most surely will guarantee Estonia's security and survival in the future even if it entails high costs now. The next statement shows what is Estonia up to in Iraq:

*Terrorists should not determine the future of Iraq and make the people of Iraq and the international community to withdraw from the goal of building up a sovereign, democratic and prosperous Iraq*.

All these views are integrated into a new “National Security Concept of the Republic of Estonia”, adopted in 2004, where it is stated that “Estonia’s approach to the matter of national security is in full accord with the principles of NATO’s Strategic Concept” and that “Membership in alliances with common democratic principles and goals is the main basis for, and guarantee of Estonia’s national security”. The new security concept is a bit contradictory in terms of where the threat of war comes for Estonia:

*The probability of a military conflict breaking out that would encompass all of Europe or the threat of a conflict in the Baltic Sea region has been reduced to a minimum. Membership in NATO and the EU reduces the threat of war for Estonia even more*.

Even if the threat of war has been reduced in Europe and in the Baltic Sea region, it does not mean that membership in NATO and the EU reduces the threat of war for Estonia generally. Rather contrary: if we consider Estonia to actively participate in the missions to Afghanistan and Iraq, Estonia might now be a target for Islamic terrorists as much as Spain or UK. One might indeed conclude that collective identity led to the threat perception, not the other way around.
5. Prospects for the improvement of relations between Estonia and Russia

Even if the Russian threat has been turned down in Estonian foreign and security policy discourse, the improvement of relations with Russia is still in question. Not until the Russian troops were withdrawn from Estonia at the end of 1994, was the immediate military threat from Russia a major concern for Estonian security policy. Since the Positive Engagement policy in 1994, the relations with Russia improved remarkably, but worsened again along with Russia's campaign against Chechnya and with Russia's opposition to the NATO enlargement to the Baltic States. Surprisingly enough, Russia's actions were interpreted not in terms of a threat to Estonia's security but rather regarded non-democratic per se, i.e not appropriate in a given international context. Estonia might also have denied Russian security guarantees offer in 1997 not so much because of the feeling of an immediate threat from Russia, but rather due to the historical reasons and Russia's non-democratic development, which contradicted with the values of the West that Estonia shared. Russia’s offer of security guarantees strongly conflicted with these values Estonia was striving for. There was some sort of unique consensus or “common knowledge” about this matter among Estonian foreign policy elite that helped to rule out accepting Russia’s – we could say even “friendly”- offer. In its official statement from 03.11.1997 Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs explicitly rejected these guarantees, stating that:

*Unilateral security guarantees do not correspond to the spirit of the new Europe; these kinds of guarantees and regional security agreements have never been and are not also now on the agenda of Estonian foreign policy*.

With accepting the U.S. security offer – the U.S.-Baltic Charter - in January 1998, Estonia made it clear that it wanted security guarantees from the West, not the East. Signing the U.S.-Baltic Charter was interesting in the sense that it broke down one of the “taboos” in the Estonian foreign policy, namely – no signing of any kind of unilateral security political agreements, aiming at security guarantees. This might suggest that Estonia has gone through a learning process *à la* “we want security but not the one proposed by Russia”. Especially, since Estonia became a member of NATO in 2004, dealing with Russia seems to depend not so much on how threatening it might be perceived, but rather on Russia's change of its identity into a more Western one (i.e more appropriate one), as concerned in the next statement:
As I also noted at our spring foreign policy guidelines debate, the improvement of Estonia's relations with Russia would be helped along by the international condemnation of the crimes of Communist regimes, by Russia admitting what happened in the past, as well as by the signing of the border treaties. At the same time Estonia has echoed implicitly that it does not expect Russia to be a part of “us”, but instead regards Russia as a necessary “other” against who it might be possible to measure Estonia's own degree of adoption of Western values and make appropriate foreign and security policy decisions. For example, Russia is regarded as “a significant obstacle” to stability in the Caucasus region: 

There are obvious obstacles on the road towards liberal democracy and economic stability in South Caucasus. The so-called “frozen conflicts” constitute a particular challenge. The continuing existence of Russian military bases in Georgia is another significant obstacle to achieving stability in this country in particular.

During the debates on signing Estonian-Russian border agreement in April 2005, such a pressure from Estonia on Russia to change its “thinking” was even more explicitly expressed by then foreign minister Urmas Paet:

It is very important that Russia readmit illegal immigrants having come from there, no matter, which country's citizens they are. Here we cannot compromise; we cannot alter the meaning of the agreement. The absence of an agreement is better than a bad agreement, because in the case of a bad agreement we cannot foresee the potential consequences.

In sum, Estonia expects Russia to go through the same learning process which Estonia has done since 1991. This suggests that Estonian-Russian relations will not improve until Russia's foreign and security policy thinking is more in tune with Western values and, accordingly, Russia's behaviour is more appropriate in a given international context.

Conclusions

The current study suggests that Estonian national identity (nation-state identity) has been transforming into a collective identity with European economic and security organizations - in this case with NATO. This transformation is reflected in the Estonia's foreign and security policy discourse. Estonian foreign and security policy has been strongly influenced by an immediate Russian threat and geopolitical factors in the formative years of the newly born Estonian Republic (1991-1994). Since 1994 or so Estonia has been harmonizing its security policy
discourse with the one of NATO, eventually leading to the full membership in 2004. The constructivist approach to the today's alliance policies suggests that Estonia’s ideas about its national interest and foreign policy preferences have been taking into account the changing nature of social practices, identities and role perceptions contra to Waltz’s systemic or holistic model. Estonia has chosen NATO-membership for the reasons of shared understandings about security, and has consequently disregarded Russia's proposals in the security policy realm, since these did not correspond to the Western understandings of security in a new Europe. By now this has led to the situation where NATO’s belief systems, norms, values and practices have become a part of Estonia’s identity, functioning independently from external stimuli, e.g. from Russia’s foreign policy actions whatsoever. The Estonian security policy rhetoric gradually changed from perceiving Russia as a threat to perceiving Russia as a culturally and politically different society compared to Estonia, while NATO and Western states were perceived more like “us”. Consequently, in dealing with Russia Estonia has been trying to harmonize its policies and behaviour toward Russia with that of NATO’s stance as well.

The article aimed also at showing the impact of international norms (human rights, democracy, rule of law) on Estonian foreign policy-making, reflected in the discourse of the Estonian MFA during the Kosovo crisis in March 1999, U.S. Campaign against Afghanistan in 2001 and the crisis of Iraq in 2003. The elite socialization seems to be a sufficient account for the impact of international norms on Estonian foreign policy-making. This study shows how an international normative structure (embedded also in NATO) makes national actors to adopt these norms almost automatically, understood as an appropriate behaviour in a given normative environment. Another account for the explanation would also suggest some sort of instrumental rationality on behalf of Estonia to adopt these norms, since Estonia’s support of these norms would have facilitated Estonia’s joining the EU and NATO.

NOTES


4 Rather contrary: small states tend to bandwagon, not balance.


7 Ibid.


12 Banchoff, “German Identity and European Integration”, p. 277.

13 Ibid

14 Inayatullah & Blaney, “Knowing Encounters: Beyond Parochialism in International Relations Theory”, p. 82.


20 Hinnebusch, “Identity in International Relations: Constructivism versus Materialism, and the Case of the Middle East”, p. 359.


35 Ibid.


43 Ibid.