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15 years of NATO membership of the Baltic States – What role does trust play amongst the members of the Alliance?

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“Unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno” or “one for all and all for one” – the catchphrase we all know from Dumas’ Three Musketeers. If living by this motto is not a testimony and demonstration of pure trust, I am not sure what is. When you are ready to stand up and fight, or even sacrifice yourself for all, for others, it shows the kind of devotion and commitment that would not arise if there was no trust. Would going to a war be easy if you didn’t think that your allies would do the same and battle for you, when you are the one in need? I think not, it is incredibly hard to fight for something you do not believe in, the feet would feel too heavy to lift off the ground and the heart too hesitant to fight passionately. That is why I believe trust is the component that you cannot build a strong and solid alliance without. The following essay will talk about one of the most successful alliances in history - North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and answer what role the trust plays amongst the members of it.

Glancing from the historical perspective some instances have proven that trust is crucial when trying to form an alliance. If we remember what happened in 1939 and under what conditions was Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact signed we can easily determine the agreement was condemned to fail, because we know that neither of the Allies trusted each other. The so called “Treaty of Non –Aggression” between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany did not grant the peace, even Stalin did not believe that Hitler would not attack eventually. Even after these diplomatic relations between Germany and Soviet Union were established the mistrust and suspicions remained. In June 1941 operation “Barbarossa” begun and Germany invaded Soviet Union. It is clear that both sides were far from being trustworthy and credible from the very beginning. A lesson to learn from this historical piece – there is a very little chance to form a successful alliance with no trust.

If we have already mentioned the Musketeers’ slogan, we must now throw one more phrase on the table – “An attack against one Ally is considered as an attack against all Allies”. Once again, sounds like something that would be impossible to implement without trust. The phrase is an essential point of the Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which also makes the collective defence a cornerstone of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Undoubtedly, collective defence was also one of the main reasons Lithuania and other post – Soviet nations were so eager to join the Alliance. The inconvenient geopolitical situation of Lithuania made the NATO protection so desirable, and surely joining NATO became one of the greatest independent Lithuania’s achievements.

This year the Baltic States along with Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Bulgaria are celebrating their 15 years’ anniversary of the membership in NATO. However, I must admit that to this day many Lithuanians do believe that Lithuania has no power and influence in a 29 country Alliance and the country’s voice or needs cannot be heard. There shall be no secret that smaller countries often have their own insecurities and Lithuania is not an exception. Surviving between bigger neighbours can be a challenge and, in fact, historically had been a really tough one for Lithuania. Years spent under oppression being occupied, attacked – always in somebody’s way, Lithuania had to put up with the fact that there is no way we can go back the Grand Duke’s Vytautas’ times, when Lithuania’s shores trailed from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Therefore, yes, it is true that some Lithuanians do tend to experience a small country complex, with groundless certitude that we are too small to be heard, to be important or even to have great achievements on a global scale. Why does it all matter? Well, one of the roles trust plays amongst the members of NATO is helping the smaller countries integrate well and feel like the rightful and equal members of the Alliance.

This role works because of several reasons. First of all, because of the consensus principle. Every single NATO member has a veto right when making important decisions, regarding the size or population of the country. We could say that the principle is also based on trust, every member is expected to try to reach an agreement that is best for everyone, if every member descends just a little bit, a consensus will be reached more easily. Therefore, admittedly, smaller countries do not use their veto rights carelessly whenever they want. There is also a common sense understanding that the countries that have nothing to do with the ongoing topic do not actively participate in the discussion. For instance, if a small country does not have an access to the sea or no interests, they will most probably not discuss NATO’s maritime strategy.

Another way how being a part of NATO helps to overcome the “small country complex” is when bigger countries show trust in smaller country’s specialization area. Without a doubt, every country of the Alliance can bring something unique or useful to the table. There shall be no prejudice if there is trust, no matter which country you are from, if you are a brilliant specialist in your area, even the biggest countries of the Alliance will listen to what you have to say. Every NATO member would agree that they cannot be specialized in every single subject that comes up and would accept the leadership of a smaller country that can offer the best specialists on the matter. For example, Denmark is one of the smaller countries, but has ecology as one of their priority subjects and, for this reason, are actively involved in the discussions and decision making about it.

The Baltic States ever since breaking free from the Soviet Union and joining NATO, we may assume, felt safe, knowing that the Alliance will come to their rescue in case of need or emergency. However not that long ago, in fact in 2007, we have encountered, well, a break of trust really. What happened then was nothing else but an attack on Estonia. Just not a military one. It was a cyber- attack that occurred just after Estonians took down the Soviet memorial to the Red Army and moved it away from the city centre in Tallinn. The targets were Estonian media platforms, banks, parliament, ministries and other important organizations’ websites. During the attack Pro-Russian messages and graffiti appeared on both governments’ and president’s web pages. The scale of the attack was massive, for three weeks the cyberspace of Estonia had been violated and disturbed. Therefore, during the moment of crisis, the heads turned to NATO, as “the attack on one of the members is considered as an attack on all of them”. However, the Article 5 in this scenario was not invoked. The main obstacles to do that were the inability to trace or to prove the origins of the cyber - attacks to be coming from Russia as well as the fact that the definition of aggression against a member of the Alliance does not classify cyber - attacks as military attacks. Despite incident not involving territorial invasion, Estonia seemed to be really struggling and lacking ability to immobilize the attacks. Therefore, Estonians expecting major help from NATO and Article 5 not being invoked led to new trust issues inside of the Alliance. The doubt, whether smaller countries can feel safe and assured to have the protection of the Alliance, had emerged into the public sphere of the Baltic countries.

In Lithuania the trust in the allies, in NATO itself has varied as fifteen years have been passing by. After actively seeking the membership and Lithuanians very much looking forward to join the Alliance, just after entering the organization in 2004 the proportion of people trusting NATO was remarkably high. Then the numbers dropped noticeably after the 2005 incident when the Russian fighter Su – 27 violated Lithuanian - NATO airspace and crashed inside the territory of Lithuania. The event evoked criticism towards NATO with the media questioning where was NATO’s air protection and disrupted the illusions that joining the Alliance meant that all the job of taking care of country’s safety was done. Nevertheless, after understanding how important the security issues are Lithuanians began to realize that the input, investments and general Lithuania’s involvement in NATO matters must grow.

In such manner, especially, after annexation of Crimea (2014) and the whole Ukrainian crisis, when the fears of the dangers from the East in the region have grown and the defence matters are on the front page again, the trust in NATO has been growing lately. For instance, the survey ordered by the Lithuania’s Ministry of National Defence in 2018 revealed that 86 percent of the polled Lithuanians (3 percent more than in 2015) are benevolent towards and assesses NATO positively while only 9 percent (1 percent less than in 2015) have contrary opinions. Moreover, 81 percent are in favour of constantly having forces of the Allies in the country’s territory. The rather positive attitude and increase of trust strongly correlates with the actual measures and action taken in order to contribute to the welfare and safety of the Alliance.

Firstly, the financial measures and actions. If there was no trust inside the organization, would there be a point in or, to be more concrete, would there be any willingness to make financial commitments? Probably not, hence, we can say that trust amongst NATO members plays a role of ensuring that the states will be eager to put their resources onto NATO’s common table. In 2014 at the Wales Summit of NATO, the Allies agreed and promised to increase their military spending and spend not less than 2 percent of national GDP on national defence. However, most of the countries are still far from succeeding to keep their faith and reach those 2 percent of GDP that are desired.

Consequently, the country that spends the most on defence – United States (∼3,6% of GDP) is clearly unhappy about that. And Donald Trump as a President of course will make sure everyone knows about this dissatisfaction. Trump is known for his controversial utterances, sometimes illogical, sometimes extremely straightforward pronouncements, thus, his statements about NATO are no exception. From claiming total credit for increases in alliance’s defence spending to accusing European members of owing massive sums, the President of United States has been caught several times telling half - truths or false statements. And that, as a matter of fact, does not add on building trust inside the organization. Moreover, it threatens to dismantle the existing trust between United States and the Allies.

Even further, such public tactless acts are a danger to NATO’s image. In this particular case, if the President of United States publicly scolds NATO leaders, presumably it will have negative impact on American people’s viewpoint and attitude towards NATO. And, indeed, Americans have already been organizing protests against NATO. On the contrary, if the Allies trust each other that is reflected in all of the outside communication between organization and the media, press which results in forming a positive image of the organization in the eyes of the people of member nations.

And what is so important about people trusting the Alliance one may ask? It is not difficult to answer that the people are the state and not only they literally pay for country’s defence, but they are the human resources that will defend their country or in NATO’s case may defend an Ally country, in case of emergency. In Lithuania the compulsory military service has been removed in 2008, but in 2015 the conscription was reintroduced. This was a great success, as this allowed the society to feel the presence of the army closer, the trust in Lithuanian army grew, according to the survey made in 2018 (ordered by the Lithuania’s Ministry of National Defence), 71 percent of the polled ones expressed trust in the army. Another survey made in 2017 showed that vast majority - 88 percent believed that it is every citizen’s duty to defend their country. Most importantly, 71 percent believes that NATO would defend Baltic States if they were attacked, so the trust in both NATO and Lithuanian army is gratifying.

After all, the fifteen years of Baltic States membership in the Alliance had ups and downs, however, no one can deny the benefits that NATO had brought to the region from the granted protection to the fostering of the integration process of the Baltic countries when establishing close relations with the Western world. The trust that has been developed throughout these 15 years must be highly valued. The results of the trust developed amongst the members of Alliance are undeniably positive, because the role that trust plays in the Alliance, as discussed before, includes, firstly, making it easier for countries to commit financially and contribute to the welfare of the Alliance in all the ways possible, because you trust that other Allies will be contributing too; secondly, the presence of trust amongst the members helps to integrate new members, also smaller countries and help them find themselves being valued; thirdly, if the Alliance demonstrates trust in one another, it displays a positive image to the public. Of course, the essential role of the trust amongst members is assuring stability of the Alliance, no disunities and one common direction for all of the Allies to follow, creating shared values and putting the concentration of the Allies on one goal. As or the future, there is a great variety of dangers that can emerge as a threat to the Alliance, therefore maintaining the trust amongst Allies may become more important than ever. The sense of togetherness that trust establishes in the organization is the key for the Alliance to thrive and not become vulnerable in the face of any possible crisis.

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