The Baltic States

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The potential enlargement of the European Union (EU) is an ongoing topic of debate, marked by increasing concerns and uncertainties. While Ukraine and Moldova have made significant progress and met all the requirements to start the negotiations to join the EU, Georgia's recent adoption of the foreign agent law has posed a serious setback to its aspirations undermining countries' progress towards EU membership. Despite the varying degrees of progress among these Eastern Neighbourhood countries—Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia—none have fully met the Copenhagen criteria, the essential benchmarks that guide the EU's acceptance of new member states.

In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, these nations have accelerated their efforts to join the European family, firmly believing that

their future lies within the EU. This renewed push for integration underscores the urgent need for a more effective and sustainable approach to democratization in the region.

Rather than engaging in endless debates about the merits of EU enlargement or the differing perspectives of international actors, this article advocates for a novel strategy: leveraging the unique experiences of the Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—as key facilitators and mediators between the EU and these aspiring member states.

On the 20th anniversary of their EU accession, the presidents of all three Baltic nations issued a joint statement declaring, "EU enlargement is foremost about freedom, democracy and human dignity. It is the Union's key geopolitical instrument in projecting peace and security on the European continent and counteracting threats of authoritarian regimes." This statement not only reaffirms their commitment to the EU but also signals their readiness to assist Ukrainians, Moldovians, and Georgians in pursuing European membership.

The path to EU membership is complex and multifaceted, requiring candidate countries to undergo extensive internal reforms. These reforms extend beyond mere systemic changes, affecting the very fabric of society, including the ideology and values of the people. Given the rise of democratic backsliding within some existing EU member states, a critical question arises: How can a sustainable and effective transformation and consolidation of democracy in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries be achieved?

Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia are the most democratic former Soviet Union states that have yet to join the EU. Their journey toward European integration shares similarities with that of the Baltic States, which successfully navigated the transition from Soviet republics to full-fledged EU members. Reflecting on the Baltic experience offers valuable insights for the Eastern Neighbourhood countries.

The Baltic States as Key Mediators in European Integration

The Baltic States should be recognised as leading mediators between the EU and Eastern Neighbourhood candidate countries. Here is why:

Exemplary Democratic Standards: Among the Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004, the Baltic states stand out as the most democratic. Their progress has brought them close to the levels of democratic governance seen in the Nordic countries. Thus, their experiences can serve as a blueprint for the Eastern Neighbourhood countries, demonstrating the potential for successful democratic transition in post-socialist states.

Learning from Past Mistakes: The Baltic States' transition from socialism to democracy was not without challenges. By acknowledging and analysing their mistakes—such as issues surrounding the integration of Russian-speaking populations—these nations can offer invaluable lessons

to Eastern Neighbourhood countries. Understanding these pitfalls can help guide former socialist states, particularly those with a strong Russian influence, in avoiding similar missteps.

Increasing Influence in the EU: Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Baltic States have gained a more prominent voice within the EU. Their regional insights and historical experiences are crucial assets that the EU can leverage to promote sustainable democratisation in the Eastern Neighbourhood. By stepping up, the Baltic States can craft clear and realistic guidelines to support these candidate countries in their European integration journey.

Leadership on the Horizon: The recent nomination of former Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas as the next High Representative of the EU is a significant development. This role, one of the highest in the EU, particularly in foreign policy, signals a potential shift in the EU's approach. It may be an opportune moment for the Baltic States to take on a more central role in shaping the future of Europe, particularly in its eastern expansion.

While the Baltic States may not be the EU's primary economic powerhouses, their experiences and insights are crucial for shaping the future of Europe. They exemplify how smaller nations can have an outsized impact on regional stability and democratic development.

The path ahead for Eastern Neighbourhood candidate states is undoubtedly challenging. However, the current geopolitical crisis offers the EU a unique opportunity to reinforce its position as a powerful promoter of democracy. The Baltic States, with their rich experience and deep understanding of the post-Soviet transition, are well-suited to serve as key facilitators in this process. By acting as mediators, they can help ensure the sustainable democratisation and successful integration of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and other aspiring EU members into the European family.