

## **The concept of The North in Baltics' 16+1 communication**

*Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova*

*Head of the New Silk Road programme, Latvian Institute of International Affairs*

“A country in the North of Europe, celebrating 100 years,” reads a poster by the Latvian Institute - an institution the main goal of which is the "promotion of Latvia's positive international recognition, through the creation of competitive identity for the state". According to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are Northern European, not Eastern European countries.

As L.Bershidsky of Bloomberg has put it: "If you happen to think the three Baltic nations -- Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia -- are East European, post-Soviet states, be careful not to say so to politicians from the three small nations," hinting that the Baltics are pushing to rebrand themselves to attract investment rather than due to preexisting historical conditions. The matter is not as simple, however - indeed, the three Baltic states do not want to keep spreading the message of their presence in the Eastern bloc, but there is also a deeper historical self-attribution of the three nations as Northerners.

Therefore, one of the main symbolic issues the Baltic countries were facing at the beginning of the “16+1” format was the geographical affiliation - whether the positioning of the Baltic states within Eastern Europe would achieve the opposite to what these countries were trying to communicate since the 1990-s; whether being explicitly named “Eastern” would influence the perception of the region in the eyes of fellow Europeans; and, most importantly, shape the narrative on Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in China, stressing the Socialist heritage over the Baltics' selling points - dynamic economy, innovation, as well as complete EU, Eurozone and Schengen integration?

This paper sets out to explore, how have Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia communicated the concept of the North within the cooperation between China and the 16 Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC), ultimately determining whether the Baltic Northern affiliation message has been heard by China.

## CONCLUSION

In retrospect, when managing voices of concern coming from Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius, China has succeeded in persuading the Baltics that the symbolic component of the meaning invested in the element “Eastern Europe” is secondary to pragmatic cooperation.

Also, China has taken measures in terms of attributing the region to the North rather than the East, providing regional diversification initiatives among the 16 countries. However, the cooperation within the 16+1 format has contributed to the “Eastern,” rather than “Northern” perception of the Baltics.

To help the Baltics escape the “Eastern bloc” association, other formats should also be explored, such as the “Nordic-Baltic 8 plus China” and “Baltic 3 plus China” - the existing parliamentary cooperation within these formats should be developed to include other pillars of exchange and more publicity should be channeled into it.