

**THE STUDY OF MESO- AND MEGA-AREA DYNAMICS:
METHODOLOGICAL AND EMPIRICAL
CONSIDERATIONS¹**

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One of the most intriguing questions posed by the model of meso- and mega-area dynamics is: does a discipline of post-communist studies still exist? The question is relevant to the degree that different areas of the former Soviet empire increasingly exist in entirely different social, political and economic contexts. The processes and realities of one region have in many instances completely ceased to have to any relation to the processes and realities of another. In the extreme, one could ask, for instance, what could there possibly still exist in terms of comparative analytical points between such disparate countries as Turkmenistan and Slovenia? The totalitarian restoration and international isolation of the one jars glaringly with the successful democratization and regional integration of the other. To say that they both share a “communist past” seems almost like an irrelevant fact of history.

Yet in the social and political sciences, the study of *divergence* from a common starting point represents as important a scholarly discipline as the study of *convergence* – no matter how normatively superior the latter may be considered to the former. The story of post-communism is one of vast divergence over time. But it is a story that still needs conceptual and theoretical modeling – such as has been proposed by Osamu Ieda.

This paper will begin with some methodological considerations that stem from Ieda’s introductory text. These will concern the relationship between mega-areas and geopolitics, structure vs. agency, and external vs. self-identities. The second and third parts of the paper will be devoted to some empirical notes that derive from the example of the Baltic states as well as the European Union. Here I will examine how

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well the Baltic states fit the dependent and independent variables posited by the model. In conclusion, I will consider the potential contribution of meso- and mega-area research to large-scale comparative theory.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

In Osamu Ieda's theory of meso- and mega-area dynamics, the central hypothesis can be summed up as follows: differential (triadic) interactions among the external, self- and institutional identities of a meso-area will determine the kind of movement (backlash, transitional, transformational or evolutionary) that the meso-area will undergo between two (exit and entry) mega-areas. Put in more operational terms, we could say:

- the more a meso-area remains burdened by **institutional** identities, the more likely it will end up in a **backlash** mode;
- the more a meso-area succumbs to an **external** identity, the more likely it will undergo a **transitional** entry into the new mega-area;
- the more a meso-area puts forth its own **self-identity** during its movement toward the new mega-area, the more likely it will engender a **transformational** dynamic of both the exit and entry mega-areas;
- the more a meso-area's identity remains a vague **mixture** of the three identities, the more likely it will develop an **evolutional** status between mega-areas.

In this framework, therefore, the key analytical task involves assessing correctly the interaction and balance between the three identity forces. It requires adequately operationalizing and measuring both the amplitude of each identity force as well as any change in this amplitude over time. In simple terms, we must be able to figure out:

- what are the indicators of external, institutional and self-identity?
- how do we assess whether each of these is strong or weak?
- how do we know when an identity has become stronger and weaker? and
- how do we figure out how much this change has been?

Only when we have answered these questions for all three identity types can we produce a composite value for the independent variable of “triadic identity interaction,” which we would then need to correlate with the dependent variable of degree or type of mega-area exit or entry.

To be sure, exacting such methodological rigor from a conceptual framework such as this one might be too stringent, since the model already has great intellectual value as a simple abstraction. Still, it is worth trying to make as explicit as possible the methodological bases of our analyses, in order to ensure the validity of our empirical conclusions. For in the end, simple conceptual models can eventually become full-scale theories or laws, if their variables are sufficiently operationalized and they yield consistent, predicted outcomes over a range of cases.²

A second methodological point concerns the question of agency within meso-mega area dynamics. To an important degree, the analysis of meso-mega area dynamics represents the study of global geopolitics. While change in meso-mega areas is inevitably slow (usually lasting at least a decade, if not more), this does not mean that such evolution is not the object of willful attempts to influence its path or to steer this movement toward some politically desired direction. To be sure, single political leaders can rarely hope to achieve large-scale meso-mega area change during their individual term in office. In this sense, it would seem irrational for leaders to try and alter the shape of regional geopolitics if they know that they will not be able to see the fruits of this transformation during their political career. At the same time, the will to leave a lasting mark on society (as well as perhaps even a wish to “improve” society, however improvement is defined) does result in political decisions and policies often being adopted, which aim at significant meso-mega area change. In a word, the argument here is merely to problematize the degree to which meso-mega area change can be viewed as simply a spontaneous, unconscious blending of different regions. Or should it be seen also within a conscious geopolitical context, where relevant political players view this change as involving certain stakes or interests and therefore they act in a deliberate manner, when formulating opinions and adopting policies?

² Gary King, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference In Qualitative Research* (Princeton, N.J., 1994). See also Stephen Van Evera, (1997), *Guide To Methods For Students Of Political Science* (Ithaca, 1997).

This does not mean that meso-area shifts between two mega-areas should necessarily be interpreted as “battlefield” politics or as a “clash” between geopolitical tectonic plates. Clearly, superpower politics in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus region or Central Asia could all too easily lend itself to this kind of analysis. It is, however, to say that even meso-area leaders (alongside mega-area ones) will always aim to steer their region’s course in the direction of some desired end and that all political decision-making will be willful or goal-oriented to some degree.

In this respect, the basic question of how much identities are crafted by conscious agency or instead pre-determined by structural-historical legacies remains at issue. When we speak about the triadic interaction of “self-identity,” “institutional identity” and “external identity,” we are in fact pitting at least two conscious political decision-making processes (self- and external identity) with a third, more structural one (institutional identity). To a certain degree, therefore, both the self- and the external identities can be seen as purposefully struggling against some kind of institutional legacies, while institutional identities remain a more static, passive force. The latter can simply drag a meso-area back, but it cannot be a strong proactive element on its own. In this way the *essence* of meso-mega area change must be seen as intentional and not merely arbitrary or sundry.

By default, therefore, such a conclusion influences the way in which we must evaluate the behavior of actors involved in meso-mega area change. In particular, meso-area actors are not necessarily pawns in a chess game between mega-areas. Rather, meso-mega area change may actually require meso-area actors to be the *initiators* and *protagonists* of change, rather than being merely its object. This in turn means that we must re-assess the capacity of meso-areas to actually transform the identity of the mega-areas they both exit and enter. In this respect, meso-areas may not represent simply minnows cast out at sea, ready to be eaten up by larger fish. Rather, they may become conscious and constituent elements of a new mega-area, and thus prompt transformation of the entry mega-area much more frequently than one might imagine.

Lastly, it is worth recalling the degree to which mega-areas also undergo a triadic interaction of identities, and that their behavior may not only be the product of self-identity or even institutional identity.

Rather, mega-areas may also be subject to external identities, be they the pressures of globalization, the normative prescriptions of human rights law or (more broadly) the worldwide trend toward democracy. Mega-areas such as the United States, Russia and even increasingly China have felt these influences quite significantly. Thus, mega-areas are not just broad areas of hegemony or political influence. They also involve certain responsibilities or the provision of collective goods in order to make the mega-area work. While meso-areas may be subordinated to certain rules or procedures of the mega-area, they may still be in their rights to demand the maintenance of basic services provided by the mega-area, which may be necessary for the meso-area to operate. Here, the argument resembles that of hegemonic stability theory in international relations, where the hegemon may rule over large areas of the international economy, but it must also bear the burden of providing and enforcing general rules that resemble collective goods.³ For example, in the case of the US during the Cold War, Washington's political superiority was paired with a burden to maintain the dollar as an international currency – at least until 1971 when this task no longer proved sustainable and the Bretton Woods system was abandoned.

Likewise, meso-areas can appeal to certain principles or norms enforced by the mega-area in order to attract the latter's attention or extract greater assistance from it. As we will see, the fact that the European Union represents a community of democratic norms and solidarity means that meso-areas that equally maintain (or aspire to) such ideals may demand due recognition of this fact and may even demand equivalent access to such a union – all of which may not be in the initial interest of the mega-area. In this respect, a mega-area may be as much *obliged* to integrate new areas as it is covetous of them.

With these methodological considerations laid out, we can proceed to a more concrete empirical analysis of the Baltic states as a meso-area between the former Soviet Union and the European Union. But here two questions arise. First, what is the precise value of the Baltic states on the dependent variable of meso-area dynamics? Where should we place Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on the scale of “backlash,”

³ Meaning smaller players, e.g. meso-areas, benefit from the existence of the rules without having to pay into the cost of their creation or their enforcement.

“transitional,” “transformational” and “evolutionary” dynamics? Second, once we have determined a value on the dependent variable, does this correspond with the model’s predicted values on the independent variable? Does our assessment of the meso-area dynamic of the Baltic states match with the predicted amplitude or combination of self-, institutional and external identities? Only when both of these questions are answered can we assess the model of meso-mega areas on the level of theory.

MESO-AREA DYNAMICS IN THE BALTIC STATES

With the Baltic states’ formal entry into the European Union in May 2004, it is clear that we are not dealing with a “backlash” type of meso-area dynamic. Indeed, some analysts might say that “backlash” became out of the question as soon as Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius decided to reject participation in the Commonwealth of Independent States. For others, meanwhile, the question might have hinged on the definitive withdrawal of ex-Soviet, Russian troops from the Baltics in 1993 and 1994. Lastly, some may see lingering signs of backlash to the degree that Baltic transit trade with Russia remains high or Moscow retains political strings it can draw in the Baltics (such as agitation of the Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia or the influence of Russian-born politicians such as Yuri Borisov or Viktor Uspaskikh in Lithuania). Be these interpretations as they may, it seems clear that some kind of definitive exit from the Russian mega-area has taken place.

Likewise, the inclusion of the Baltic states in EU enlargement means that these states have also not been left in an “evolutionary” gray zone. They are not likely to become their own separate area, neither as a sort of “Baltic union” nor in tandem with, say, the Nordic area. Suggestions of a special union between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania surfaced only briefly during 1989-1990, but quickly faded. Meanwhile, integration with the Nordic countries has primarily been economic, not political, and this at the behest of the Nordics themselves.

It remains, therefore, to qualify the Baltics’ meso-area dynamic as either transitional or transformational. As defined by Ieda, a transitional

dynamic would represent a situation, where the meso-area is entirely absorbed by the entry mega-area, and although a certain part of the entry mega-area is influenced by the presence of the new meso-area, it retains its primary character and instead integrates most of the meso-area into its own system. By contrast, in a transformational situation, the meso-area remains a separate entity for still some time; but in contradistinction to an evolutionary situation, the meso-area still influences in some indirect way the character of both its exit and entry mega-areas. In sum, the difference between transitional and transformational dynamics rests in the degree to which a meso-area influences its entry mega-area either from inside or outside.

In the case of the Baltic states, our task involves examining how much these states have changed the character of the EU and from where they have done it, i.e. from being inside or outside the Union. It is my argument in this paper that in a paradoxical fashion the Baltic states (along with the other erstwhile "candidate countries") have actually influenced the character of the EU more as applicant states than they will now as formal member states. This argument involves the simple fact that the EU itself decided to accept these states and in so doing *was forced to confront its own institutional, political and economic underpinnings before beginning accession negotiations*. Put in other words, the EU itself opened a process whereby it would have to re-examine its entire *raison d'être* in order to make enlargement possible.

To be sure, the candidate countries would have to go through their own process of adopting EU rules and regulations, and these procedures would certainly alter the character of the candidate countries. But if one considers that the EU also began a process of reckoning with a new type of Union by adopting the Copenhagen criteria (1993), devising a whole new system of accession aid packages, restructuring its voting mechanisms, and ultimately drawing up an entirely new Constitution for the Union, it is clear that the Union has done just as much adaptation in its own way as the candidate countries have on their side. It has had to take on a vast share of the ultimate responsibility for dealing with the legacies of the Cold War in Europe by designing an extremely detailed political process and institutional structure whereby the continent could be united again. This was far beyond the capacities of either the Council of Europe or even the Organization for Cooperation

and Security in Europe. It may yet even be beyond the capacities of the EU. Time will tell. But it is important to note that in agreeing to undertake the massive enlargement of the Union, EU leaders have agreed to radically transform the substance itself of their erstwhile community. The Union is no longer a simple economic club for those private members who founded it in the 1950s. It is an organization, which has taken upon itself large-scale responsibilities for the economic, political and social reconstruction of Central and Eastern Europe. To be sure, some of these capacities were already developed during the accession of Greece, Spain and Portugal to the Union. But nothing on the present scale has ever been undertaken, indeed not only in Europe, but anywhere in the world.

In this respect, the oft-cited debate between “deepening vs. widening” in the EU is real, and to a certain extent widening has won out over deepening. The EU has not and will not undergo a major degree of deepening in terms of formulating a common foreign and security policy or harmonizing its socio-economic policies in the near future. Major international crises such as the Iraq conflict will most likely divide Europeans again and again in the future, while debates over whether to unify tax rates or standardize unemployment benefits will continue. However, in an important way the Union *has* deepened by widening, since, as argued above, the task of widening (or indeed doubling the number of member-states) involves such immense preparation and transformation of the Union itself that it does represent a qualitative change in the way the Union operates and must learn to get along with its different constituent parts. The process of European re-unification across the entire continent is itself an important type of deepening, since it is bringing together once and for all the people of Europe in a way they have never been together before.

The case can, therefore, be made that the entry of the Baltic states into the EU – together with, of course, all of the other new member-states – represents a transformational type of meso-area change. The new member-states are naturally being absorbed into an EU-mandated system of political and economic cooperation. But this system has itself been re-crafted so extensively that it is hardly the same as it was before. The entry of the Baltic states into the EU is not a transitional dynamic to the extent that the EU has changed much more than a simple enlargement would have entailed. If one takes as the classic case of

transitional dynamics the absorption of East Germany into West Germany, then the enlargement of the EU has been something qualitatively different, infinitely more complex.

In sum, the dynamic of the Baltic meso-area has revealed itself to be, on the one hand, a misnomer to the extent that the Baltic states themselves have not constituted a clearly delineable meso-area. Instead, they have been part of a wider meso-area, meaning the dozen or so countries slated to join the EU during the current decade. At the same time, they have participated in a transformation of the EU and its fundamental goals – much more than is often remembered or acknowledged nowadays. Whether this new EU will work out remains to be seen. But as an unprecedented example of political and economic partnership, its achievements have already been notable.

TRIADIC IDENTITY CHANGE IN THE BALTIC STATES

The next stage in testing the propositions put forward by the model of meso-mega area dynamics is to assess the types and degrees of triadic identity change among the Baltic states to see if they match with the transformational type of meso-area dynamics noted above. If the hypotheses stated in the first section of this paper are correct, then the Baltics should show a somewhat greater level of self-identity, which has in turn helped to overcome the drag-effect of institutional identity or the smothering effect of external identities.

Osamu Ieda speaks of members of the Eastern European meso-area as still having an “ambivalent consciousness.” They are “No more Eastern, but not yet Western.” They are still caught between a *Sollen* and a *Sein*. Yet, if the above analysis of EU enlargement is correct, then it may well be important to question whether the *Sollen* of Western Europe was in fact such a stable composite of norms throughout the last ten years, and whether this external identity did not itself evolve during this time. If it turns out that the external identity to which a meso-area must aspire is itself transformed over a certain period, then it becomes more difficult to assess analytically how a meso-area’s triadic identity is supposed to adapt. If the *Sollen* is in fact a constantly moving target, how can it be *Sollen*?

In the case of the EU, of course, the criteria set for accession by the new member states were fairly clear-cut and stable. In this sense, I do not argue that the formal nature of the Copenhagen criteria or of the *acquis communautaire* ever changed. This dimension of *Sollen* remained. What did change, however, was the type of Union that the new states (including the Baltics) would be joining. It would be a Union, which would have to make sufficient room for the new entrants together with access to all of the same rights and obligations. EU enlargement would have to build a place for the new members, while recognizing that this process would in and of itself restructure the Union.

It is in this sense that the *Sollen* changed, and indeed most likely for the better. It is also reflective of the point made earlier that mega-areas, too, have their external identity. In this case, it is the EU's external identity as a standard-bearer of democratic political integration. Increasingly, the EU has taken upon itself the role of democratic magnet, which draws to it new devotees and helps spread democratic norms. This is an impressive undertaking. At the same time, this attraction requires a lot from the EU in terms of engagement and interaction with the new partners in order to make sure the new norms take root. The allure of the EU as a stable, cooperative and prosperous union is strong. In this respect, Ieda's characterization of the EU as a "communal" type of mega-area is entirely accurate and a key reference point. But the integration that serves as the basis for this success is not easy to bring about. When extending the prospect of membership to all of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the EU itself has to live by its principles of democratic political integration and hence restructure its own essence. This adaptability is at one and the same time a precondition as well as virtue of such democratic magnetism.

The corollary to this phenomenon is that self-identities in the meso-area are more likely to remain intact, and indeed influence the new mega-area, rather than be overwhelmed by the external identity. The principle of democratic integration between the meso-area and the mega-area will mean that the meso-area will potentially be able to contribute to the new structure of the mega-area, rather than be overrun by it. The fact that the peoples of ex-communist Europe are "No more Eastern, but not yet Western" may not be that important if they themselves help to reconfigure what Europe as a whole will mean for the continent. Self-

identities may quickly become simply “European” to the extent that peoples are engaged in a continent-wide endeavor. Regional identities may not hold such powerful sway when placed within the context of a multi-national cooperative political project.

An indication of this blurring of self-identities has begun to emerge from the patterns of alliance-formation among both old and new member-states in the European Union. Some new entrants, such as Estonia, rarely sought to form coalitions with the other Baltic states or even more broadly with the other Eastern European states simply on the basis of geographical proximity or common recent history. The perception among many candidate country elites of their country’s true national interests has often been much more multi-dimensional, meaning that on certain issues greater alliance can be found with older member-states than with newer ones. For example, at different points in time Estonia has sought to cast itself as a pro-market liberal tiger, which has more in common with the United Kingdom and Ireland, than with Lithuania, Poland or even Finland. In this kind of context, self-identities are no longer Eastern or Western; they are simply policy-based.

Among average Balts, of course, self-identities are slower to change. For example, in a 2004 survey conducted in Estonia immediately after the June European Parliament elections, only 44 percent of respondents said that they think of themselves as EU citizens either “often” or “sometimes.”⁴ (Indeed, only 6.4 percent of the respondents actually answered “often.”) Likewise, only 25 percent said they were either “very proud” or “rather proud” to be an EU citizen. Fully 36 percent said they were “not at all proud.” Lastly, the survey revealed that at least among Estonians levels of trust toward other Europeans remain highly region-specific. The highest rates of trust (i.e. where 50-60 percent of respondents said “I trust them very much”) were reserved for the Latvians, Lithuanians, Finns, Swedes, Danes and Germans. Mid-range levels of trust (i.e. 40-50 percent) were accorded to most of the Western European nations (UK, Ireland, Netherlands, Belgium, France). Countries belonging to both Eastern and Southern Europe, however,

⁴ The poll was conducted among 1606 respondents as part of the 2004 European Election Survey. It was executed in Estonia by the Department of Political Science at the University of Tartu and Turu-uuringute AS.

ranked low (between 20 and 40 percent), including Poles, Slovenes, Hungarians and Czechs, along with Italians, Spaniards, Greeks and Portuguese. In this respect the cleavages did not run along east-west lines, but rather north-south.

Institutional identities among Balts, though present, also seem to be fading. One of the strongest institutional legacies believed to exist in ex-communist Europe is a yearning for strong, single-person rule instead of chaotic multi-party government.⁵ In the Baltic states, support for such rule has declined over the years. Whereas in the beginning of the 1990s, as many as 60 percent of Balts would agree that a single, strong leader would do more for the country than many individual parties,⁶ by 2004 this number in Estonia was down to just 34 percent (European Election Survey). Differences continued to exist between the native populations (Estonians, Latvian, Lithuanians) and their Slavic minorities (Russians and/or Poles), where the latter supported one-man rule slightly more. But on the whole, there was little nostalgia for non-democratic government.⁷

Perhaps more indicative of democratic frailty as an institutional legacy in the Baltic states was the degree of party system instability. In particular between 2002 and 2004, all three countries saw the meteoric rise of new populist parties, all of which promised either new honesty in politics, greater social spending or better protection of national interests.⁸ Each party received roughly a quarter (if not more) of all

⁵ The example of Turkmenistan again comes to mind, alongside Belarus, Azerbaijan and many others.

⁶ For data from the early 1990s, see the surveys conducted by Richard Rose (University of Strathclyde) as part of the New Baltic Barometer.

⁷ To be sure, surveys like the EU's Eurobarometer continued to show up to 60 percent of Balts being "not very satisfied" or "not satisfied" with "the way democracy works in their country." But as Linde and Ekman have argued, this survey question is more likely to reveal popular opinion toward the current government in power than with the broader notion of democratic support. Moreover, given the possibility of varying understandings of democracy across Europe, certain respondents may have a higher standard of democracy than others, thus skewing the comparison of opinions. See Jonas Linde and Joakim Ekman, "Satisfaction with democracy: A note on a frequently used indicator in comparative politics," *European Journal of Political Research* 42:3 (2003), pp. 391-408.

⁸ These parties were Res Publica in Estonia, New Era in Latvia and the Labor Party in Lithuania.

votes cast during the first parliamentary election they participated.⁹ The result was a *bouleversement* of the party system in each country, and a scramble among politicians to try and figure out new alliances and possibilities for governing coalitions. In Latvia, this proved particularly chaotic, prompting three different governments to rotate in office during just two years. Clearly many more electoral cycles will be needed before both voters and political elites will come to form more stable preferences. The institutional legacy of not having any fixed cleavages or organized interests will remain for some time.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has had two main aims: 1) to raise some methodological reflections concerning the general model of meso-mega area dynamics, and 2) to provide some empirical considerations concerning the specific case of the Baltic states and the European Union. We have seen that the meso- and mega-area framework provides much food for thought in terms of studying how countries and people have shifted their geopolitical attachments and patterns of societal integration across the former Soviet empire. A comparative view such as this is essential if we are to place the general issue of post-communist transformation into a broader context and not get too caught up in our own regional specificities.

In addition, however, the meso- and mega-area model provides a distinct method for juxtaposing old and new trends amidst this general process, for comparing structural- vs. agent-based variables, and for delineating types of eventual integration. While more work awaits in order to fully conceptualize and operationalize variables such as the different types of triadic identity, the model does provide the tools we need to begin to make sense of how divergences have emerged among the different areas of the post-communist space. Variance hitherto

⁹ In Estonia, Res Publica received 24.6 percent of the vote during the 2003 Riigikogu elections. New Era in Latvia swept 23.9 percent of the votes during the 2002 Saeima elections. And in the most recent 2004 Lithuanian Seimas elections, the Labor Party triumphed with 28.4 percent of the votes cast in the party-list voting.

understood in mere geographic or cultural terms is now becoming more conceptually and causally defined.

As concerns the empirical validity of the model, the notion of a separate meso-area for Baltic states proved somewhat over-stated. Indeed, one could argue that all of the ex-communist countries of Europe are fading as a meso-area to the extent that they become involved in the new European integration project and its attempt to build a consolidated political community among nearly 30 individual states. In general, we might categorize this development as a transformational, rather than transitional dynamic, although here too we might see a completely separate type emerge if the new European Union succeeds. This new mega-area would instead be a collective creation by all its members.

In this respect, Baltic identities do correspond to the conceptual model. Institutional identities have gradually been overtaken by external identities. Yet given the fact that the *Sollen* of the European Union has itself changed, the space for Baltic self-identities to contribute to the new European community has also been expanded. The more accommodative possibilities offered by the EU's democratic, communal type of integration mean that the otherwise competitive or apparently confrontational nature of the triadic identity nexus (i.e. that all three identities somehow vie amongst themselves) might actually be harmonized into a positive-sum game. If this were to happen, it would certainly prove to be one of the most impressive outcomes of post-communism.