(The Baltic states and the European system (1985–2004). To be and become European

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It would be almost a truism to argue that academic work in French about the Baltic States is uncommon especially compared to those in English and even to those in German. In such conditions, reviewing a book penned in French on that subject takes an exceptional meaning. The author, who was a Ph. D student at Science Po (this book was originally his doctoral thesis defended in 2010), belongs to this new generation of young scholars very keen to contribute to a ‘French school’ of Baltic studies. Note, in addition, that he is the organiser of Sciences Po’s Centre de Recherches Internationales’ seminar ‘Autour de la Baltique’, thus demonstrating a genuine role of pioneer as well as an ambition to stimulate in France a strong academic interest for this region, hitherto quite far from usual French interests.

Combining historical depth and political analysis, this book analyses the integration of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, between 1985 and 2004, within the European system by the yardstick of a (neo-) realistic perspective. His theoretical framework, which really stands up, is consistent with his main arguments even if the authors he quotes are not really in ‘the spirit of the times’, talking of power in world politics being not nowadays really ‘fashionable’. The reader wishing to understand how small Powers like the three Baltic States have achieved their ultimate goal, joining NATO and the EU, despite the strong opposition of a big Power, Russia, will be convinced. In addition, for strengthening his argumentation, Perchoc uses appropriately a combination of four models of European architecture of security – the Vienna Model, the Versailles Model, the Yalta Model and the Maastricht Model – in order to clarify the different strategic configuration in which actors have sought to invest their security. Making use of an Aronian vocabulary, Perchoc analyses the inclusiveness, hierarchy, homogeneity, polarity, and stability of the four models, and shows how each of them is considered by different actors.

This book is structured chronologically in three parts. In the first part (‘Good-Bye Yalta’. Des Républiques Soviétiques aux Républiques baltes), Perchoc aims to give an overview of the ‘Baltic question’, during the last years of the Cold War, in the game of the great Powers. The articulation between neo-realism and Perchoc’s arguments makes sense here. Indeed, one might be sceptical about the relevance of analysing

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1 From the Soviet Republics to the Baltic Republics. All translations are the authors’.
the issue of the great Powers without the primary object of research: between pages 49 and 62, there is bluntly no mention of the Baltic States. Nonetheless, it is an awkwardness that the reader will quickly forget as he will understand that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, after their brutal incorporation at the end of the Second World War into the USSR, have regained their independence when the same Soviet Union, on its last legs in a context of competition with the US, was incapable of handling the challenge to its supremacy in the Baltic republics. Additionally, Perchoc shows persuasively, on the one hand, how the Baltic States have used some peculiar resources of power, such as on environment issues, for challenging the Soviet presence on their soil and, on the other hand, the role of the Baltic diaspora in the US for supporting American policy. In the second part, ("L’Impossible Versailles. Les États Baltes, entre Volonté d’Intégration Internationale et Construction Nationale (1991–1998)"); Perchoc sheds light on the issue of the articulation between the reconstruction of each of the three countries and their integration in the Euro-Atlantic architecture of security. If Russia turned out to be a good ally for them when they challenged the USSR, it became quickly a vehement adversary when they sought to anchor their security in the Euro-Atlantic architecture. By frequently crossing swords with a Russia extremely hostile to their strategy, the Baltic States have shown that their primary objective was precisely to leave the Russian orbit forever despite resources trifling in theory but which turned out, in fact, to be powerful. In the third part, ("L’Intégration Régionale comme Réponse au Dilemme de Sécurité Balte"), the author shows that the regional integration of the three Baltic States has been a successful way for softening the issue of their anchorage in models of the European Architecture of Security. The Nordic states, indeed in various degrees, became quickly some strong allies – in spite of heterogeneous status, Norway member of NATO, Sweden and Finland member of the EU and Denmark member of both – whereas the US showed at first some caution and afterwards a genuine will to see them joining NATO in a context where they were to join the EU as well.

Ironically, the Baltic States cumulate strong differences and common atypical features, the first of them being ‘small’ Powers geographically close to a major one which prevented them from completing successfully their strategy. The reader familiar with the Baltic States may stay slightly dissatisfied by the lack of assessment on differences between the three countries. Each of them has never hesitated to stab the two others in the back if its interests demanded it. Perchoc seems to overestimate the homogeneity of the Baltic States. A chapter on this issue, incidentally, would have been very relevant.

Nevertheless, the major weakness of this book arises with the form and the methodology. At first, there are some problems, particularly for French-speakers who care about their language, since the author abuses Anglicisms. Without being a gadfly, Perchoc needs to acknowledge that the word ‘agenda’ in English is in French ‘ordre du jour’ and not ‘agenda’ which means ‘diary’ (for instance p. 49). Similarly, ‘dramatic’ in English is in French ‘spectaculaire’ and not ‘dramatique’ which means ‘tragique’ (p. 101). In addition, his methodology concerning interviews is rather awkward. There are neither names of the actors interviewed, nor explanations on the way Perchoc constructed his method for conducting interviews (even if one
may guess that he conducted semi-structured interviews). Besides, there are some mistakes in some names he quotes (for instance p. 18, the name of one of the French pioneers on Baltic studies is François de Labriolle and not Denis) and some maps are barely readable (for instance p. 151). Further, the system of references in some footnotes is not very convenient: a significant number of them are so general that the reader feels almost forced to read all the quoted book or article to understand what Perchoc meant. In addition, the reader will be astonished by chapter 4: bluntly, there is no paragraph 2 after paragraph 1 (indeed, one could question whether the editors of the series have done their job properly). All these problems of form mar the quality of the book.

The problems of form are a shame because Perchoc’s work is a good tool for understanding how ‘small Powers’ like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have succeeded where others have failed. Indeed, the author concludes his work in 2004. Nevertheless, to some extent, it stays very relevant during a period in which the security of Europe is challenged by the conflict between the Ukraine and Russia. Why did the same not happen in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as happened in the Ukraine? Indeed, Perchoc’s book might be relevant to understanding the tragic events in the Ukraine even though everything of course is not transposable.