

Baltic Liberation First-Hand: Sweden's Pro-Baltic Foreign Policy Shift and Swedish Diplomatic Reporting in 1989-1991

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Sweden was one of the very few Western countries officially to recognise the incorporation of the Baltic states into the USSR in 1940 as lawful. While this naturally had a detrimental effect on the reputation of Sweden in Baltic liberation activist circles during the end stage of the Cold War, it also meant that Swedish diplomats did not have their hands tied to the same extent as those states that had not recognised the annexations. The first permanent Swedish “department office” was already established in Tallinn in December 1989, and Swedish diplomats such as Lars Fredén and Dag Sebastian Ahlander could experience the rise of the Baltic liberation movement first-hand and at an early stage. This article focuses on Swedish diplomatic reporting from the emerging Baltic states and Russia in 1989-1991 as a source of the pro-Baltic policy shift in Swedish foreign policy, which challenged the dominant policy discourse in Sweden that prioritised appeasement of the USSR/Russia.

Keywords: Sweden, Baltic states, Cold War, diplomacy

Introduction

The aim of this article is to investigate the character and development of Swedish policies towards the emerging Baltic states through the lens of Swedish diplomatic reporting from (what were then) the three Soviet Baltic republics and the Russian SFSR. The relevant reports, now in part publicly available, provide new details about Swedish engagement with the question of Baltic independence and constitute a rich contemporary source about the various hopes and fears attached to the impending collapse of the USSR and the re-emergence of independent states in its western borderlands.

In my analysis, I will focus on the Swedish diplomats’ predictions of what might happen as the result of the then ongoing events, what the appropriate role of Sweden was imagined to be in the process of Baltic liberation, and how the diplomats, explaining the current political situation or motivating further action on the part of Sweden, made use of historical parallels and arguments – not least as related to the legacy of pre-1989 Swedish policies.

The motivation behind this study is the assumption that Sweden’s remarkable degree of support for Baltic states from autumn 1991 onwards needs to be seen in the context of Sweden’s previous policies, and especially its long-standing scepticism towards the viability of Baltic statehood. My working argument, which reaches beyond the confines of this particular study, is that the shift towards pro-Baltic activism in Swedish policymaking originated in important ways from the Swedish diplomats working “on the ground”, that is in the Baltic republics and Russia in 1989-1991. Their attitudes towards ongoing events and the shared Baltic-Swedish past anticipate the somewhat later development of full Swedish support for Baltic independence and Sweden’s managerial role in the post-Soviet transition of the Baltic states, which emerged on the level of the Swedish government’s official policy in October 1991. In that sense, the Swedish diplomats were successful policy innovators.

The primary aim of this article is to support this argument with an analysis of a particular corpus of sources: the Swedish diplomatic reports from the Baltic republics and Russia, as well as memoranda from the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (*Utrikesdepartementet*, UD), which were released online in 2011¹ as an exception to Sweden’s general 40-year secrecy rule for diplomatic documents. Parallel to

that, I will also make use of the published memoirs of the actors involved,² as well as post-factum witness seminars.³ Such latter-day sources are best used sparingly, as they naturally both benefit and suffer from the hindsight of their authors, but they provide a necessary context for the contemporary documents and can help to explain their significance.

It is important to note that the material released in 2011 suffers from its own source critical issues. According to a foreword attached to some of these documents published as a separate booklet, they had been made public in order to “show how the Swedish foreign service worked, acted and thought in these dramatic years, when the history of the world was upturned.”⁴ The intention was thus not to enable the reader to judge whether Swedish policy had been appropriate, nor to provide a compilation of its most significant documents, but rather simply to illustrate the breadth and nature of UD’s archival holdings on Baltic issues in the period 1989-1991. Even this task is not fulfilled without reservations: in the introduction mentioned above, it is explicitly stated that the compilers decided not to include any documents containing material coming from other (i.e. non-Baltic and non-Swedish) political and diplomatic sources,⁵ thus making it impossible to test the possible alternative theory that it was foreign (EEC, NATO or Nordic) influence on Swedish policy that was of decisive importance, rather than home-grown activism. It is also possible that the selection, as it has been presented, obscures disagreements between the individual diplomats, or is biased in other ways. As noted below, there is a remarkable lack of documents originating at UD itself, and one is left to wonder whether this might be because these would have shown UD in less than positive light.

While Denmark and Finland seem to have released most, if not all, of their Foreign Ministry holdings relating to Baltic liberation, how representative the available Swedish sources are is unclear. Although the volume released is relatively large at roughly 400 pages, we can safely assume that the archives of UD must hold many relevant but unreleased documents still under the 40-year secrecy rule. This article can therefore only be a preliminary investigation, and not a full, well-rounded account of Swedish diplomatic involvement in the process of Baltic liberation in 1989-1991, which can only be written when all source material has been made public.

Swedish attitudes towards Baltic independence until the end of the Cold War

Historically, typical Swedish attitudes towards the idea and reality of Baltic independence were characterised by a large measure of passivity and cautiousness.⁶ To understand why and how this was the case, it is useful to begin with a brief overview of Swedish policy from the first emergence of the Baltic states (in the end stage of World War I and the early interwar era), down to the late 1980s.

The collapse of both the Russian and German empires in 1917-1918 had an almost immeasurably positive impact on the geopolitical security situation of Sweden (and the other Scandinavian states). Since the great power overlay of the region was at least temporarily weakened, the necessary conditions arguably existed for the development of a more activist Swedish policy towards the new states appearing in former Russian borderlands and constituting a natural buffer zone between Sweden and Russia. Yet this opportunity went unused, and early attempts on part of the Baltics to set up a “Baltic League” of neutral states in the region, with Sweden as its leading power, were given a cold shoulder by Sweden.⁷

Instead, the view quickly adopted by both the left and the right in Swedish politics was that Sweden should remain devoted to its successful neutrality policy, should not allow itself to be tempted by illusions of grandeur (such as the leadership role in a federation), and should not become entangled in the question of the future of Russia. Since the Baltic question was regarded as a natural part of the

latter, and the future re-assertion of Russian territorial interests in the Eastern Baltic was seen as almost inevitable, Baltic independence would only be supported in ways that were noncommittal with respect to Sweden. Any close political relationship with the Baltics, however, was seen to increase the likelihood of Sweden being drawn into future conflict with Russia. The sole exception amongst the newly independent border states was made for Finland, but even in the Finnish case, a tacit agreement was reached by most Swedish political elites at an early stage that Swedish engagement was to remain limited.⁸

Although Sweden eventually did come to recognise the independence of the Baltic states *de jure* in 1921, this was a reactive, not a proactive step, caused only by the thorough change in political atmosphere. At a time when post-world war hostilities had ceased, the independence of the Baltic states had been recognised by most other western powers, and the three new states were already in the process of being admitted into the League of Nations, it was no longer politically expedient for Sweden to delay recognition. This naturally led to improved relations between Sweden and the Baltic states during the rest of the interwar period, but Swedish scepticism in their long-term survival nevertheless persisted.⁹ All new attempts on part of the Baltic states to propose some sort of closer political cooperation with Sweden and the other Scandinavian states, especially in the tense political climate of the 1930s, went ignored and unanswered. Indeed, in 1940, Sweden was second only behind Nazi Germany (a Soviet ally at the time) to recognise the legality of the Baltic states' annexation to the Soviet Union and saw the events of 1939-1940 as a vindication of their previous policy choices.¹⁰

This made Sweden almost unique amongst all Western states, which for the most part refrained from actively supporting Baltic resistance movements, but nevertheless retained a principled non-recognition policy.¹¹ In Sweden, however, the view from 1940 onwards remained that the Baltic states no longer existed and would never exist again.¹² This important concession to Soviet (and Nazi German) interests was of course not directed against the Baltics *per se* but was rather a part of the Swedish strategy of survival as a small state in the front line of both World War II and the Cold War. There was furthermore no reason to revise this policy in the following years, as appeasement of the Soviet Union remained central to the so-called "Nordic balance" regional security configuration which came into being by the early 1950s, and in which Sweden's role was to play the part of the strictly non-aligned state.¹³

However, it is also important to note that despite this principal policy stance, Swedish "noncommittal support" for the Baltics did continue in certain ways: Sweden did tacitly allow a degree of Baltic émigré political activity in its territory,¹⁴ and went as far as to accept tens of thousands of Baltic refugees during the end stage of World War II. Despite Soviet pressure that "their citizens" be made to return home, only a small number of refugees were actually extradited. Moreover, this episode (the so-called *Baltutlämningen*), has remained a traumatic event in Swedish collective memory, while from a Baltic perspective, it is merely a single incident in a decade of bloody mass repression and political injustice.¹⁵

All in all, the voluntary Swedish concessions to Baltic interests during World War II and the Cold War can be interpreted as at least some degree of recognition that the Baltic grievances were justified, even if mainly on humanitarian grounds. Over time, such sentiments also began to be expressed more openly, particularly by right-wing politicians who criticised Swedish neutralism in the face of breaches of human rights in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The leaders of the dominant Social Democratic party, such as Prime Minister Olof Palme (in office 1969-1976 and 1982-1986), however, were quick to condemn the right-wing attachment to the "crusade-like spirit to liberate Eastern Europe" and assured that Sweden would not "jump onto some kind of a crusade of the type that reactionary forces are always ready to organise."¹⁶ As late as 1988, Sture Ericson, a Social Democratic member of Sweden's parliamentary committee for foreign affairs, openly criticised his Conservative opponents' "foreign

policy initiatives with the purpose of creating three new states by the Baltic Sea,” which in his opinion were “nothing but follies, naturally fostered in extreme Conservative circles because it will possibly give them a share of exile Baltic votes in this autumn’s elections.”¹⁷ Such rhetoric indicates that at least at that point, effective cross-party support for Baltic independence still lay in the future.

The shift in Swedish foreign policy

The enormous change in Sweden’s geopolitical security situation when the Soviet Union eventually collapsed in autumn 1991 was in some ways similar to that which had taken place at the end of World War I. Again, the developments were very favourable in principle – the implosion of the USSR and the end of bipolar superpower rivalry meant that Sweden’s security situation improved in sudden and unforeseen ways. And, just as in 1918-1920, a row of small independent nation states emerged on the other side of the Baltic Sea, further shielding Sweden from any remaining Russian threat. In this case, however, the Swedish response to these events ultimately proved to be different: active, rather than passive, and enthusiastic, rather than sceptical.

To explain why this was the case, I would argue for the significance of three factors: firstly, the security-related concerns around the easing of superpower tensions and the future of the USSR; secondly, the move to the right in Swedish politics; and finally, the Swedish tradition of activist internationalism, now morphing into “adjacent internationalism.”

Firstly, the changes in the international security situation were a cause for both optimism and concern for Sweden.¹⁸ The need to appease the USSR, which during the Cold War had made any close engagement with the Baltics impossible, now had the potential to become less relevant thanks to the apparently liberal policies of the new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, and the demonstrable unwillingness of the USSR to prevent the Communist regimes of its Eastern European satellite states from being toppled.¹⁹ Nevertheless, this line of thought did not lead to immediate policy change for Sweden. In 1988, the Swedish Social Democratic government felt that irrespective of the outcome of Gorbachev’s reforms, the superpower confrontation would still continue, making Swedish neutrality policy a necessity for the foreseeable future. Any part that Sweden could play in furthering the détente was still thought to lie in its role as a neutral acting through international organisations.²⁰

The assumption that the Cold War would go on made any rash political changes seem like threats to international stability. As later recalled by Örjan Berner, the Swedish Foreign Minister Sten Andersson had reacted to the 1989 events in Eastern Europe with much anxiety, rather than seeing them as a cause for celebration.²¹ UD’s initial response to the Baltic developments must have been similar, since intensified instability so close to Sweden itself, not to speak of any “disorderly” break-up of the Soviet Union (see below), posed a considerable threat. The 1917-1920 dissolution of the Russian Empire had shown that the war and violence sparked in its former borderlands were in many ways just as traumatic as the experiences of World War I, which had led to the Russian revolutions in the first place. In the age of nuclear weapons, a similar scenario would have been very dangerous indeed.

At the same time, the potential magnitude of the crisis also meant that Sweden could not remain a complete bystander, however strong its passivist and neutralist inclinations. At the very least, it would need to be well-informed about the ongoing developments, which was probably the reason why Swedish diplomatic presence in the Baltic states was prioritised early on (see below). If Sweden wanted to ensure continuing regional stability and security, it obviously needed to know where this stability would be found – in the hands of Gorbachev or somewhere else – and what exactly could be done to promote it.

Secondly, the lead-up to the end of the USSR coincided with important domestic developments, which created a space and expectation for new ideas and policy innovation.²² The “Nordic model” of the expansive and expensive Social Democratic welfare state, predicated on stable economic growth and high taxes, was, by the late 1980s, in increasingly deep crisis due to structural changes in world economy (globalisation). By 1990, Sweden had fallen into its worst recession since 1929. At the same time, right-wing criticism of both domestic and foreign policy, as well as the legacy of having been the party responsible for Cold War era high-tax high-spend policies, made it difficult for the two consecutive Social Democratic cabinets of Ingvar Carlsson (1986-1990 and 1990-1991) to come up with effective and innovative political solutions. The subsequent electoral success of right-wing parties led to the new government of Carl Bildt (October 1991-October 1994), which, lacking such policy baggage, was in many ways better-situated to tackle these problems.²³

Nevertheless, the preparedness for policy change was more than just a matter of party politics. In fact, it was the incumbent Social Democratic government that took one of the most crucial steps towards Swedish foreign policy renewal: the abandonment of old neutralist reservations about Sweden’s participation in the process of European integration. This was publicly first demonstrated in August 1990 by Prime Minister Carlsson’s statement of intent to apply for European Economic Community (EEC) membership, and, subsequently, by the actual lodging of the Swedish membership application on July 1, 1991.²⁴ It was in many ways a decisive break with the neutrality-focused foreign policy of the Cold War era, as such a move would have been completely impossible just a few years earlier²⁵ – after all, from the Soviet point of view, the EEC/EU was nothing but an economic arm of NATO, i.e. a thoroughly partisan western alliance.²⁶ Now, however, as Soviet policies changed and its power and influence waned, the pressure to follow the policy of neutrality decreased and more room for policy manoeuvre became available.²⁷

Sweden’s new interest in the Baltic states was another facet of this broader policy shift and shared some of its causes.²⁸ The decisive move to the right in Swedish politics in autumn 1991 certainly had a pro-Baltic effect, since preference for regional (rather than global) international commitments had been a typically Conservative policy stance for a long time, even if it originally only applied to Finland, not to the Baltic states.²⁹ But in the longer run, the emerging Baltic states would benefit even more from Sweden’s new engagement with the process of European integration.³⁰

Thirdly, Swedish foreign policy and foreign service were politicised in a very particular way. From the 1960s onwards, Sweden had developed a world-wide reputation for the promotion of internationalism, solidarity and global norm entrepreneurship in areas such as peaceful conflict resolution, democratisation and redistributive justice. These values and activities, which by the 1980s had become an integral part of Swedish liberal progressivist identity and point of national pride, had primarily been directed at the developing world through international organisations, especially the United Nations.³¹ This tradition, Social Democratic in origin, probably did much to eventually bring the Swedish political left over to the side of the Eastern European and Baltic liberation movements. As pointed out by journalist Arne Ruth in 2009, even Sten Andersson himself had in the early 1980s argued that Sweden had a duty to facilitate Poland’s transition to democracy “when the time is ripe.”³²

Now, when Cold War bipolarity was collapsing and third world Communist or neutralist regimes faltering, the ground was being laid to the idea of expanding Sweden’s internationalist tradition also to its own immediate geographical vicinity: the eastern part of the Baltic region, which, after decades of Soviet occupation, was in dire need of “catching up” with democratic West. This partial rethinking of Swedish activist internationalism, which Annika Bergman has christened “adjacent internationalism”,³³ required Sweden to completely abandon its previous regional security policy that had been focused on

its small-state security needs vis-à-vis the looming superpower threat. Adjacent internationalism therefore made a full breakthrough only after the collapse of the USSR, with Sweden and the other Nordic states taking on an active role in facilitating Baltic post-Soviet transition: they promoted democratisation, economic and social development, and provided help with touchy issues such as the removal of Soviet troops and the rights of the Russian-speaking minorities.³⁴ These initiatives brought Sweden's long-standing internationalist foreign policy in line with its stated goals in areas closer to home, and arguably realised an important identity function for a country that was looking for a new role in the world stage after the era of "Nordic model" and "Nordic balance" seemed to be over.³⁵

Out of the three factors outlined above, it was certainly the first one – security concerns – that played the most important role in motivating Swedish engagement with the situation in the Baltics in 1989-1991. However, this initial engagement for information-gathering purposes did not by itself cause the change in Swedish policy from Cold War-era cautiousness to post-Cold War enthusiasm. This shift would only take place when the other two abovementioned factors rose to policy-shaping prominence in autumn 1991, facilitated by the Swedish general elections and the collapse of the USSR.³⁶ The years prior to that, 1989-1991, were perhaps in hindsight a lead-up to autumn 1991, but actually in many ways a period of doubt, indecision and non-policy. Indeed, it proved difficult for Sweden to let go of long-held convictions about Soviet prerogatives in the Baltics even in the aftermath of the failed *coup d'état* of August 1991, which was already at the time widely recognised to predict imminent Soviet collapse.³⁷

While the ultimate breakthrough in Swedish policy change can be dated to no earlier than October 1991 and to the assumption of office by Carl Bildt's cabinet,³⁸ it was foreshadowed and facilitated in important ways by the work done over the three years previous by Swedish diplomats in the Baltics and in the Swedish embassy in Moscow. It was these men "on the ground" that were the first to take up the Baltic cause, and tread Sweden's path away from Cold War passiveness and reactivity towards proactive and positive engagement.

Diplomats "on the ground"

By summer 1989, the events in the Baltic republics had increasingly come to attract international political and media attention. In March, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had all declared their republics "sovereign" and their own laws supreme to the laws of the central administration. In the elections to the all-Soviet Congress of People's Deputies, held on 26 March, the candidates of the pro-sovereignty Popular Front organisations won landslide victories in all three republics. In May, their representatives publicly declared their "aspirations" for "state sovereignty in a neutral, demilitarised Baltoscandia."³⁹ The impressive Baltic Way demonstration in August, commemorating the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret additional protocol, which had carved up Eastern Europe into the Soviet and Nazi German spheres of influence, served as a great visual representation of the strength of the pro-liberation sentiment in the Baltics.⁴⁰

Swedish UD now also came to take a more active interest in the Baltic republics. Paradoxically, it was Sweden's old recognition of the Baltic states' incorporation into the USSR that came helpful in facilitating diplomatic activities, since Sweden's hands were tied less tightly than the other western states' that had not recognised the annexation. Already in autumn 1989, Swedish diplomatic representatives were stationed semi-permanently in the Baltic republics, enabling them to complement the work of the new Swedish ambassador in Moscow, Örjan Berner (1989-1994). Dag Sebastian Ahlander and Lars Fredén – the first two Swedish diplomats directly tasked with handling of Baltic

matters – were nominally the Swedish general consul and Swedish consul in Leningrad, but in reality were also the earliest Swedish diplomatic representatives in the emerging Baltic states.⁴¹ Berner himself had close contacts with Baltic representatives in Moscow.⁴²

The reports written by these men and dispatched to Stockholm reflect their first-hand experiences of the ongoing events in the Baltic republics and in the USSR. While decision-making (or the lack thereof) at UD was still primarily informed by cautious attitudes from the Cold War era, the diplomats “on the ground” could rely less on the truths of the past and more on what they had directly from the source. To them, the conventional wisdom of the Swedish foreign policy and security elites thus seemed to be behind the times, even obsolete. Berner later recalled how, when participating in a seminar about the Soviet military threat in Stockholm in early 1990, the experience felt like being “in another world.”⁴³ Not least in the times of rapid change, the benefits of “being there” were considerable.

Furthermore, the Swedish diplomats were Swedish also in their moral convictions. Although the Swedish diplomatic corps had traditionally been characterised by an inherent assumed bourgeois identity, it had gone through a period of socialist fervour in the Cold War era, producing a generation of highly politicised ideological diplomats such as Jean-Christophe Öberg and Pierre Schori who had been at the heart of promoting and executing the policies of activist internationalism.⁴⁴ This corporate legacy, which by then had become much more than just a socialist persuasion, at least partially explains why these Swedish diplomats came to support Baltic liberation movements with sincerity and ease, ready to conceive of their cause as not just a matter of power politics but also a matter of justice and democracy, which in the conditions of increasing east-west détente seemed to have their natural place also in the Baltics.⁴⁵ This form of post-1968 norm entrepreneurship also included the self-reflexive requirement to review and come to terms with Sweden’s own role in the history of Baltic independence, which, as already noted above, had often been that of a disinterested, if not outrightly dismissive, bystander.

“Duck politics” in the Baltics

In September 1989 when Ahlander was appointed as the new Swedish general consul in Leningrad he was also tasked with acting as a point of contact with the Baltic independence movements. He subsequently became a very frequent, almost weekly, visitor to the Baltic capitals, and was very well informed about ongoing events.⁴⁶ When Lars Fredén was appointed as the second consul in October of the same year, this work could further intensify, and on the initiative of Hans Olsson, UD’s Soviet Union specialist from 1987 to 1991, Swedish “department offices” (*avdelningskontor*) were established in Tallinn and Riga in December 1989 and May 1990 respectively as “departments” of the general consulate in Leningrad.⁴⁷ All this amounted to a Swedish diplomatic presence in the Baltic states from early on, even if political activities were concealed under the pretext of taking care of consular affairs.

Fredén and Ahlander were therefore not entirely regular consular officials, and in the dispatches that they sent home, there are some references to the fact that their activities went beyond what would normally be expected from men in their stations. On February 12, 1991, Fredén sent to UD a long list of recommendations on policy matters prefaced with the statement: “I am very much aware that a simple consul in the field is not expected to write memoranda like the one attached.”⁴⁸ On May 22, 1991, Ahlander did the same in a roundabout way in a report about Gorbachev’s upcoming visit to Sweden (in connection with him being awarded the Nobel peace prize): “if I had participated in the preparation of internal papers before president Gorbachev’s visit to Sweden (early June 1991), I would have written down some of the following points hoping that there would be a chance to present some of them”.⁴⁹

Whether ironic or not, such statements indicate that they felt compelled to offer their political advice even when it amounted to some pushing of boundaries not just in Swedish-Soviet relations, but also in terms of the hierarchy of UD. Although it has been said that the speed of modern communications has given even low-ranking diplomats a more active policy-shaping role,⁵⁰ their main task is usually thought to be to report the situation with objectivity and accuracy, rather than engage in “clear predictive judgments.”⁵¹ However, the highly volatile situation in the Baltics had created a demand for exactly such predictive judgements, which Fredén and Ahlander could now provide, taking on a more actively policy-shaping role.

The views in Stockholm seem to have remained a good deal more cautious and focused on what were seen as long-standing political realities. UD’s attitude is more difficult to trace based on the released source material, but Stockholm’s initial assumptions can be illustrated by one of the earliest Swedish memoranda on the Baltic question, written by Hans Olsson on September 18, 1989 (i.e. shortly after the Baltic Way demonstration on August 23, to which Gorbachev had responded with open threats). Olsson thought that “even if we disregard the less fortunate and fatal scenarios,” the most that the Baltics could hope for was some kind of special status in the Soviet Union, whereas “for the foreseeable future, full independence seems to be outside the boundaries of what is realistic.” Olsson assumed that the only way Baltic independence would become possible would be if the crisis in the Soviet Union worsened to the degree that letting some of the republics go was the only alternative to a complete collapse. But even if this was the case, the Baltics would probably have to pay a significant price for their freedom in the form of economic concessions, continuing Soviet military presence etc.⁵²

The important keywords to note here are “foreseeable” and “realistic” – in 1989, the question of whether Baltic independence in the foreseeable future was “realistic” must have been difficult to answer in the affirmative by anyone, lest they make themselves look like an irresponsible political dreamer. This was also true of Swedish diplomats “on the ground,” who at least initially were probably not much more optimistic than Olsson. Even though they believed that the Baltic separatists were on the right side of history, they were also concerned that Baltic friends were trying to get too far too fast, risking the alienation of progressive forces on the Union level. No known Swedish source considered the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union – as it in reality came to pass – to be a likely or even possible outcome of the crisis. Instead, serious fears were expressed both privately and publicly that if the situation further escalated, a violent response could be unleashed, perhaps creating a humanitarian crisis and initiating a new wave of Baltic refugees similar to that that had hit Sweden in 1944.⁵³

Therefore, from the Swedish point of view, Baltic liberation activists needed to be cautioned to moderation, and any pro-Baltic Swedish intervention, even when desirable in principle, had to be conducted covertly and in ways that were unlikely to provoke a backlash from Moscow. In a report on December 5, 1989, for example, Ahlander called for increased Swedish engagement with the Baltics by encouraging economic links, inviting representatives of Baltic progressive political circles to Sweden (on what might be regarded as various pretexts), and even supporting the teaching and learning of the Swedish language⁵⁴ – in other words public diplomacy and the covert spread of Swedish soft power. On one occasion, Lars Fredén referred to such political activities as “duck politics”: “smooth and unruffled on the surface but paddling like hell underneath”.⁵⁵

To generalise, we could say that in the years 1989-1991, the diplomats “on the ground” became advocates for more, and more ambitious, “duck politics,” whereas UD tended to be more cautious. However, care needs to be taken to not to overstate the case. As far as we can tell, any Swedish “covert operations” remained very limited, and Fredén and Ahlander were hardly “honourable spies” as diplomats have sometimes been characterised.⁵⁶ Rather, their activities reflected what Arne Ruth has

characterised as a particularly Swedish tendency of pretending to not to take sides in a conflict, and instead masking everything as some form of “humanitarian aid.”⁵⁷ As long as Swedish cautiousness made it inexpedient to openly take the side of the Baltics, it would be taken covertly, shielded by plausible deniability.

The opening of “department offices” in Tallinn and Riga (which later morphed into Swedish embassies), was the most tangible result of this quasi-clandestine approach. But even in cases when duck initiatives did not come to pass or were not seriously considered, the fact that they were even floated gives an interesting glimpse into the role that activist Swedish diplomats ascribed to Sweden: that of a progressivist peace broker with an air of moral superiority and almost magical healing powers. For example, when discussing the prospects of inviting Baltic politicians to Sweden in September 1990, UD’s deputy assistant Ingjald Starråker suggested that the group that actually most needed to visit and see Sweden were Russian conservative politicians – in this way, “their world view might be improved,” even though Starråker admitted that such a course of action “would be against Swedish customs.”⁵⁸

Imagined futures and Swedish policy objectives

While Swedish diplomats remained restrained in their assessment of what could be immediately done to help the Baltic liberation movements, they nevertheless tried to convey the irreversible and decisive nature of the events, arguing against the (probably widespread) idea that these represented merely some kind of a temporary difficulty for the USSR. They also cautioned against naivety vis-à-vis Gorbachev’s reforms, with, for example, the deputy head of the embassy in Moscow, Hans Magnusson, arguing on January 25, 1990, that it was far from the truth that the processes ongoing in Eastern Europe were mainly about the renewal of socialism.⁵⁹

On January 23, 1990 Fredén stated in a dispatch that “if we disregard the Ragnarök scenarios, I cannot actually see how the developments in at least in Lithuania could be stopped.”⁶⁰ A month later, in February, Olsson in Stockholm also accepted (quoting the Estonian Social Democrat Marju Lauristin) that “pregnancy cannot continue forever: at some point the child must be born”⁶¹ – i.e. the increasingly radical Baltic demands were going to lead to one or more of the Baltic republics declaring independence and thereby internationalising what had this far been a domestic Soviet issue. The main question, of course, was whether this would happen peacefully.⁶²

Both UD and the diplomats “on the ground” assumed that this would not be the case and tried to find ways to mitigate possible damage. In September 1990, Starråker thought that since the USSR was now in danger of collapse, chaos and possibly civil war, a joint Nordic approach should be recommended in order to boost Swedish peace-activist efforts.⁶³ A similar suggestion had already been put forward in March by Fredén, who proposed that all steps that Sweden took in the Baltics should include a Nordic dimension. This would have also responded to the hopes that Baltic liberation movements had pinned on Sweden and on Nordic cooperation. Lithuania, indeed, had gone as far as to hope for membership for itself in the Nordic Council.⁶⁴

In early January 1991, when the fate of the Soviet Union was still up in the air, Swedish ambassador Berner in Moscow assumed that the most likely scenarios at that point were two variants of “muddle through” – one with “enlightened” authoritarian leadership in Moscow and continuing cooperation with the West, and the other with a non-authoritarian, progressive and radical reform policy. A third possibility was a full-out chauvinist and Russophile dictatorship (which, among others, would be directed against the Baltics), and Berner’s fourth scenario was simply “chaos,” i.e. war.⁶⁵ On 21 January, Ahlander agreed that the Baltic crisis no longer just concerned the Baltic republics, with Russians (referring to

Yeltsin and his supporters) having now also taken the side of the Balts. Ahlander thought that the result might be a power struggle and civil war – in immediate proximity to Swedish territory.⁶⁶

Other than this general fear of escalation, the Swedish policy objectives were rather unclear. In his memoirs, Fredén links this deficiency to some early diplomatic blunders, especially the disastrous visit of Sten Andersson to the Soviet Baltic Republics in the autumn of 1989. During his trip, Andersson publicly stated that the Baltic states were not and had never been occupied by the USSR. This statement was of course fully in line with official Swedish policy that saw the 1940 annexations as lawful, but Andersson's articulation of this policy left on both Baltic and foreign observers the impression that he was, at best, ignorant, or, at worst, dismissive of Baltic aspirations towards the reinstatement of their independence.⁶⁷ As a direct result of this embarrassing *faux pas* – as well as his initial refusal to admit that he had made a mistake – Andersson found himself forced to partially recant and to state that “the Baltic states should be able to increase their sovereignty and find a future in democracy and independence.” This statement made it possible for Carl Bildt, the leader of the Conservatives, and Bengt Westerberg, the leader of the Liberals, to pass a resolution in the Advisory Council of Foreign Affairs (*Utrikesnämnden*) to the effect that the Baltic peoples have a right for a future in “democracy and independence.”⁶⁸

The Balts of course understood that Swedish attitudes were far from uniform. In early April 1990, the Lithuanian nationalist leader Vytautas Landsbergis characterised Sweden's position as “strange,” given the apparent disparity between the occasionally supportive and then occasionally dismissive comments. He also noted the very cautious attitude of the party of the incumbent government, the Social Democrats, compared to other Swedish political forces.⁶⁹

The lack of clear Swedish policy was certainly experienced as frustrating by the diplomats. In a memo to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs on February 12, 1991, Fredén complained that Sweden had thus far not been able to give the Balts any advice, even when it was being asked for. He wanted Sweden to become more active in supporting centrist political forces (probably meaning the Popular Front movements), and to make it clear to the more nationalist Estonian and Latvian national congresses that their restrictive approach to citizenship policy would not be welcomed by Sweden and the rest of the western world. As Fredén readily admitted, however, the danger of such a warning coming from Sweden would be that to the Balts, it would look like Stockholm was succumbing to pressure from Moscow, and so Sweden would risk losing their trust.⁷⁰ Conversely, the unclear nature of Swedish policy could be useful in maintaining such trust; precisely because it made it possible to ignore the larger questions. As Fredén later pointed out, he was lucky to not to have made any declarations comparable to the so-called Chicken Kiev speech of US President George Bush in the summer of 1991 – not because of his superior understanding, but rather because he was never instructed how to deal with such issues of principal importance by Stockholm.⁷¹

The use of historical analogies

Communication with policy-influencing ambitions, as diplomatic reporting was for the Swedish diplomats, can only be successful if it manages to convey its points and arguments well. In this respect, the pivotal events of 1989-1991 presented a considerable challenge: the relevant information needed to be made comprehensible in ways that would positively relate to the activist internationalist/progressivist spirit of Swedish foreign policy, while also pointing out the political and moral deficiencies in Sweden's previous and ongoing passivist attitudes towards Baltic independence.

A strategy that was useful in attaining both objectives and that was frequently used in Swedish diplomatic dispatches was to report ongoing events with the help of historical parallels. For example, to convey the seriousness of the Baltic situation in a report on December 5, 1989, Ahlander called the events “a new national awakening” for the Baltic peoples, and, from a Swedish point of view, “nothing less than a political revolution happening in Norden – the first we have seen in our days.” He then proceeded to expand the last point by comparing the Baltic situation to the revolutions of 1848, when “one authoritarian government fell after another like dominoes.”⁷² Similarly, both Ahlander⁷³ and Berner⁷⁴ compared the conditions in Russia to the Early Modern “time of troubles,” with its prolonged uncertainty and power vacuum. Another useful parallel was the 1917 Russian October revolution: on August 26, 1991, Berner titled his report on the coup attempt of August 19-25 “the new Russian revolution” and referred to it, alluding to the classic account by John Reed, as “the seven days that shook the world”.⁷⁵

There are also references to diplomats themselves seeking insight from historical documents or accounts. On June 19, 1990, Berner revealed in a report that he had been reading documents written in 1918 at the Swedish legation in Petrograd (St Petersburg), one of which had included “an ambitious analysis of the future of the Russian Empire, ending with the conclusion that it would disintegrate into many constituent parts.” In Berner’s opinion, the same could happen now, since there was no longer a communist ideology to hold the USSR together.⁷⁶ On March 9, 1990, Björn Lyrvall, the second secretary at the embassy in Moscow, discussed the myth of the Baltic states’ voluntary ascension to the Soviet Union by referring to a book of memoirs by a former Lithuanian diplomat Ignas Scheynius (Ignas Šeinius) entitled “Den röda floden stiger,” which had been published in Sweden in 1941. Lyrvall quoted an evocative passage from it, describing the hopes that the Lithuanian people had put on Sweden as a place of refuge, and its people as a political and cultural role model.⁷⁷ Fredén for his part had in the spring and summer of 1989, before arriving to the Baltics, already made himself familiar with UD’s archival files on the Baltic states from the mid-1930s onwards.⁷⁸

Perhaps partially as a result of their historical knowledge, the diplomats’ recommendations for more activist Swedish policy frequently looked back to the past. The images they evoked could be positive – for example, the “good old Swedish times” of the 17th century Swedish rule of the Baltics were mentioned by Ahlander several times in reference to both Estonia and Latvia⁷⁹ – but more often, it was the negative sides of shared history that were brought up. These included the Swedish recognition of the annexations in August 1940, the Swedish handing over of the Baltic gold reserves to Moscow before that,⁸⁰ and the extradition of Baltic refugees (*Baltutlämningen*) in 1946.⁸¹ Fredén pointed out that for these reasons, Sweden’s prestige in the Baltics was not as high as it could have been, and Sweden, too, had to come to terms with the history of its own Baltic policy. The USSR had already been forced to re-evaluate its role in the events of 1939-40 and “we cannot expect that our own history would be exempted from a heavy-handed *glasnost*.”⁸²

Ahlander noted similarly that bitterness over past Swedish actions was widespread among the activists of Baltic liberation, including even those who showed some understanding for Sweden’s geopolitical position in 1940-41, like the moderate leaders of the Estonian and Latvian Popular Front, Edgar Savisaar and Dainis Īvāns. Echoing Fredén’s concerns, Ahlander thought that the Swedish authorities should issue some sort of a public statement, and in it, for example, point out that the Swedish government in 1940 had not known the contents of the additional secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. He even proposed the establishment of a joint Swedish-Estonian history commission, financed by Sweden and tasked with reviewing Swedish-Estonian history from the 16th century onwards.⁸³

Interestingly, a very similar idea came up shortly afterwards in a conversation between Ahlander and Edgar Savisaar, who had pointed out the Swedish Social Democratic leader Hjalmar Branting's support for Estonian independence from 1918 onwards as a positive historical example, and expressed his wish that in the future, Estonia would also be included in the various fields of Nordic cooperation. Savisaar thought that one of these fields should be migration policy, as, according to him, it was important to hinder an exodus of labour from poor Estonia to richer Finland and Sweden. He also suggested that cooperation in historical research would be a useful first basis for future cooperation.⁸⁴ The fact that this idea was not limited to Savisaar personally was established in a conversation that Ahlander had the next day with Lennart Meri, the new Estonian Foreign Minister. Meri confirmed that he also supported this proposal and recommended that the history commission start its work with documents relating to the events of the summer of 1940.⁸⁵

Alf W. Johansson has argued that the small-state realism of Swedish foreign policy had made sensible historical self-criticism impossible during the Cold War.⁸⁶ Now, however, as the Soviet threat was waning and a more liberal future seemed close, such self-criticism felt increasingly appropriate. The diplomats' suggestion that some form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* would raise Sweden's profile in the Baltics was even supported by similar proposals made by the leaders of Estonian liberation movement. These attempts to direct UD's attention towards matters of historical justice (and away from the accepted realities of Cold War-era regional power politics) amounted to preparations for what would soon become the Swedish policy of adjacent internationalism: a form of better consonance between its actual activities in the Baltic Sea Region and its self-image as a "moral superpower."⁸⁷

Sweden waking up

In hindsight, it feels natural that the somewhat confrontational balance between UD and the diplomats "on the ground," which Berner later described as "*Realpolitik*-like interest politics on the one hand and moralistic standpoints on the other,"⁸⁸ would dip in the favour of the latter. By early 1990 at the latest, genuine sympathies for the cause of Baltic independence had started to emerge in Swedish political circles and in the society at large. In a series of "Monday meetings" on the Norrmalmstorg square in central Stockholm from March 1990 onwards, support for Baltic independence was articulated by all parties of the Swedish parliament. Although its most ardent supporters were on the right, many Social Democrats, too, were now willing to overcome their cautiousness, even if they did not feel quite at home standing shoulder to shoulder with conservatives.⁸⁹ In the Swedish media, admiration was expressed for the Baltic strategy of nonviolent political change.⁹⁰

This did not go unnoticed on the other side of the Baltic Sea. On March 15, 1990 – a few days after the passing of the Act of the Re-Establishment of the State of Lithuania by the Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania – Vytautas Landsbergis made a comment to the effect that "the Swedes are finally starting to wake up" to the fact that developments in the Baltics were important for Swedish national security interests, and that Sweden needed to come to terms with the possibility of Baltic independence.⁹¹ Some forms of Swedish assistance were indeed quite hands-on and concrete. Örjan Berner recalls how, right around the same time, he was "running around" in Moscow, meeting with various Soviet dignitaries on the request of the Lithuanians who themselves did not have the necessary contacts.⁹² Nonetheless, this was only the beginning. In April, Landsbergis would still characterise the Swedish attitude as "strange" (see above).

In October 1990, Sten Andersson had made a foreign policy statement in the Swedish parliament, according to which Sweden was "no longer afraid of a European war" and would participate in the

creation of “a new Europe together with other countries and peoples.” However, Andersson also said that Eastern Europe “faces major transition problems” and stated that “the future of the Soviet Union is a major factor of concern in Europe.”⁹³ In other words, Sweden remained cautious and somewhat circumspect – also rhetorically – about the developments in its own regional neighbourhood, although it now recognised that the broader processes were basically favourable.

It was during the violent events in Vilnius and Riga in January 1991⁹⁴ that Swedish active engagement with the Baltics received its first significant boost. The confrontations were reported in an alarmist manner both confidentially by Swedish diplomats⁹⁵ and openly in Swedish media.⁹⁶ After the shootings in Vilnius, 5000 people gathered in Stockholm in the presence of Swedish, Latvian, and Estonian ministers of foreign affairs⁹⁷ demonstrating the extent of public support for the Baltic cause. All Scandinavian prime ministers urged the Soviet leadership to stop using force, with Sweden’s prime minister going even further to state that “Soviet actions in the Baltic republics cast doubt on peace and détente in Europe in general.”⁹⁸ Sten Andersson made an unequivocal public statement that Sweden “can never accept the Soviet central authorities employing pressure, violence or threats of violence to resolve disputes with the Baltic republics.”⁹⁹

In a memorandum on 6 February, Hans Olsson recounted that over the last few weeks, demonstrations of support for Baltic parliaments and governments had been held in Sweden, three official Swedish parliamentary delegations, as well as Pierre Schori, had been sent to the Baltic capitals, and a million Swedish crowns had been earmarked by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs for radio programmes in Lithuanian and for other concrete measures in support of Baltic liberation. Furthermore, a Swedish office was being established in Vilnius in addition to those in Tallinn and Riga, and an Estonian office was being set up in Stockholm. The Swedish government had protested against Soviet actions at CSCE,¹⁰⁰ and Sten Andersson had sent a letter of concern to his Soviet counterpart Eduard Shevardnadze.¹⁰¹

Nonetheless, all these measures primarily amounted to an abhorrence of state violence, whereas there were still limits to how far the Swedish government was prepared to go in terms of positive engagement. According to Sten Andersson’s statement, the main lesson to be learned from the crisis was that poor economic development, social unrest and new conflicts in the former Communist bloc had constituted a new type of security threat. It was left to his opponent Carl Bildt to argue (in the following parliamentary debate) that regional stability could only be achieved if the independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania was recognised.¹⁰² Interventions from the diplomats “on the ground” were not particularly successful at this stage either. Fredén writes in his memoirs how his memorandum from February 1991, in which he requested proactive Swedish support for centrist political forces, was deemed “too activist, which back then was certainly no praise at the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs”.¹⁰³

In any case, the diplomats kept the pressure on. On May 22, 1991, Ahlander again highlighted the importance of Swedish-Baltic history and Sweden’s progressivist values in a letter to Pierre Schori ahead of Gorbachev’s visit to Sweden. Ahlander argued that Sweden’s engagement with the Baltics and their peoples should be built on the principle of the right of self-determination, geographical closeness, Sweden’s historical outreach in the Baltic Sea region, and even the existence of a Swedish national minority in Estonia before World War II. He also suggested that the Baltic peoples’ interest in Scandinavia and Nordic cooperation reflected sympathy for the way that Nordic societies were built on mutual understanding, solidarity and peaceful foreign policy. Therefore, it was Sweden’s duty to facilitate the inclusion of the Baltic states in Nordic cooperation, and to work towards a more integrated Baltic Sea region in general. More concretely, Sweden needed to be ready to support Baltic post-Soviet transition – also economically – and be prepared to recognise their independence together with the rest

of the western world – either with or against the wishes of the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁴ In his memoirs where he reproduces this letter, Ahlander does not say whether his intervention was welcome or not,¹⁰⁵ which is probably a reasonable indication that its impact was limited.

By June, the Swedish position regarding Eastern Europe had already shifted considerably. In a speech on Sweden's forthcoming European Community membership application on 14 June 1991, the Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson stated that "Soviet military withdrawal from Central and Eastern Europe appears to be irrevocable" and the risk of war in Europe had therefore become "extremely limited."¹⁰⁶ This reasoning, however, could not apply to the Baltics, where the Soviet Army was still very much present.

At the same time, it was probably no longer the case that UD's distaste for a more proactive approach in the Baltics represented pure continuity with Cold War era appeasement policies. More likely, Swedish unwillingness to formulate a clear Baltic policy was simply a feature of the immensity of the task at hand, which, as Fredén remarks in his memoirs, touched upon some of the most central issues in Sweden's neutralist security policy that had been unchallenged ever since the defence negotiations following World War II.¹⁰⁷

The coup attempt of August 1991 and Swedish re-recognition of Baltic independence

A further challenge that tested how far Sweden was prepared to go was posed by the abortive hard-line coup attempt on August 19-22, 1991. In many ways a death blow to the Soviet Union, it brought about full declarations of independence on the parts of Estonia and Latvia.¹⁰⁸ Even as the coup was still ongoing, ambassador Berner in Moscow realised that the hardliners behind it lacked support in society at large, and resistance would grow fast once people understood that not everything was lost. He nevertheless thought that the perpetrators would be prepared to act more decisively elsewhere, "e. g. in the Baltic republics." Local Swedish citizens were gathered in the embassy and warned that civil war might lie ahead.¹⁰⁹ As the putsch fizzled out, these fears luckily proved to be premature.

After the coup was over, Berner judged that western (including Swedish) reactions had been too cautious and did not include "the clear condemnations that should have been natural, as one would think." Although Berner points out that "the language turned sharper as events progressed,"¹¹⁰ this essentially remained true even in the coup's immediate aftermath. Fredén describes a telegram sent by Foreign Minister Sten Andersson to Swedish representatives in Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius on August 23, asking them to inform the foreign ministers of the respective republics that Sweden was not yet prepared to recognise "the Baltic republics" since the conditions for it as set out in international law had not yet been met: "the governments of the republics do not yet have an effective and sovereign control over the territories in question." Andersson only allowed for the extremely cautious formulation that "the unsuccessful *coup d'état* in the Soviet Union seems to create completely new pre-conditions for an early, positive and peaceful solution to the controversies that have this far existed in the question," and promised Sweden would be ready to act in accordance with changes in the situation.¹¹¹

Contrary to the legalistic approach taken by UD, the diplomats were ready to proceed more decisively. On August 26, Berner argued in a completely activist spirit that the failure of the coup had utterly changed the natural direction of western (including Swedish) policy. Instead of continuing support for Gorbachev, the West now needed to pose a series of demands: the retirement of a large part of the senior officer corps, the abolition of a large part of the KGB, the abolishment of the Communist Party's special status in Soviet institutions and so on. Western help to the Baltics, which had previously been difficult to provide due to the danger of provoking the reactionaries, could now be openly provided as

the latter had been at least temporarily defeated. As early as August 24, Berner had met with Arnold Rützel, the chairman of the Estonian Supreme Soviet, and promised that Sweden would be ready to offer recognition as soon as it was possible in practice and in principle.¹¹² Similarly, Fredén writes in his memoirs that “keeping in mind we had been the first to be present in Riga *de facto*, I thought we should also be among the first in our presence *de jure*.”¹¹³

These hopes failed. Unlike its Nordic neighbours Iceland and Denmark, Sweden was not among the first to recognise the restoration of the independence of the Baltic states. When it eventually did happen, on August 27, Sweden was only the 20th to issue a declaration of the “re-establishment” of diplomatic relations, followed immediately by Finland. Interestingly, as noted by Fredén, the Swedish government used a formulation that should naturally have belonged only to states that had never recognised the annexations in the first place. By that point however, events had progressed so far that the Social Democratic government and its Foreign Minister Sten Andersson, having in Autumn 1989 stated the Baltic states had never been occupied, now seemed to suffer a different bout of political amnesia, making it look as if the Swedish recognition of the annexations in 1940 had never taken place.¹¹⁴

As soon as the pivotal hurdle of recognitions had been cleared, Swedish diplomacy reverted to a more cautious mode. In dispatches following the recognitions, various concerns came to be raised about the long-term stability of the new Baltic states, and proposals of more or less “Finlandized” solutions for their political future. In an encrypted message on September 6, 1991, Berner thought it would be a serious danger for the whole of Europe if revanchist Russian nationalism would rise up against the Baltics, and thought that Soviet troops should perhaps not leave the Baltic states, since otherwise fears would arise that the Baltics would become a new base for threats against Russia¹¹⁵ – thereby essentially returning to Hans Olsson’s views from two years before. The same point was echoed ten days later by Krister Wahlbäck, the new security policy expert at UD who had probably been influenced by some of the more cynical attitudes in Finland where he had been stationed previously.¹¹⁶ Wahlbäck claimed that from the viewpoint of long-term stability in the Baltic Sea Region and Northern Europe in general, it would be preferable if Russia could retain a certain military presence in the Baltics, making it easier for future Russian authoritarian leaders to accept their secession as a *fait accompli*. Wahlbäck noted, however, that such a suggestion would be unacceptable coming from the Swedes, who could not give a guarantee that the Baltic states would not fall prey to future Russian aggression.¹¹⁷

All further cautiousness notwithstanding, the success of the Baltic liberation movements had been palpable enough to give a cause for reflection for the Swedish foreign policy elites, whether they were “on the ground” or not. On September 16, 1991, Krister Wahlbäck declared that, in hindsight, it had been misguided to expect Baltic liberation activists to act more cautiously. In a way, he thought, they had been similar to Finnish activists of 1910-1917, choosing the path of hopeless resistance despite the all too real political objections. Subsequently and unexpectedly, this led to success when the Russian empire collapsed and Finland gained independence.¹¹⁸ Something similar had now happened in the Baltics.

Conclusions

As demonstrated by the documents analysed, the ultimate outcome of the events of 1989-1991 was impossible to foresee both for UD in Stockholm and the Swedish diplomats in the Baltics and Russia. However, while UD seems to have been content to act in an essentially reactive manner – down to the (re-)recognition of the independence of the Baltic states – there is evidence of more proactive engagement on part of the diplomats who experienced the ongoing events first-hand. Their activities

“on the ground” usually took the form of semi-clandestine “duck politics,” rather than any openly political action, but when enabled by changed circumstances, the diplomats did not shy away from a more direct approach, as can be observed in their responses to the events of 1991. In most cases, however, it seems that their recommendations had a limited impact against UD’s cautiousness and frequent preference for non-policy over clearly articulated stances. This situation would only change in autumn 1991, but in a way that vindicated the diplomats’ previous efforts.

Deficiencies in the available primary source situation notwithstanding, the findings of this study indicate that while Swedish diplomatic reports and memoranda in 1989-1991 appreciated the importance of long-term Swedish security interests in terms of geopolitical stability in the Baltic Sea region, they also engaged with the deep idealist traditions of Swedish active internationalist foreign policy, which from the 1960s onwards had assigned to Sweden the role of a progressivist policy innovator and global peace broker. The extension of the latter, progressivist side of Swedish policy to the Baltics was probably the crucial difference that made the Swedish response to Baltic independence at the end of the Cold War different from that at the end of the First World War. Amongst other things, this idealism is visible in the strong interest that Swedish diplomats displayed in learning about and coming to terms with previous, passivist and cautious Swedish policy, and their general proclivity to think in terms of historical parallels, recognising that past injustices needed to be compensated for, or at least remembered.

Over the course of the dramatic events in 1991, Swedish passivism was pushed to breaking point, but not to the extent that would have allowed for very early recognition of the independence of the Baltic states. Again, the Swedish recognition was essentially a reactive step, called forth by a completely (and unexpectedly) new political situation. The re-recognition was therefore not the ultimate breakthrough of the Swedish policy shift from passivism to activism towards the Baltics. Rather, this happened in October 1991, when active support for the Baltic states became firmly established at the level of the Swedish government.

These and the following events lie outside of the timeframe of the present article, but future research making full use of UD’s documents will hopefully be able to establish what degree of continuity existed between the Bildt era and the preparatory work done by diplomats “on the ground” over the preceding years. A significant connection is likely, not least because some the relevant personalities, such as Lars Fredén, ended up as members of Carl Bildt’s security policy team.¹¹⁹ Also in other ways, I hope that the results of this study can be complemented and challenged as new evidence becomes available.

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¹ The reports will be referred to using the following format: "UD <name of the author>, <title>, <date>". They can be accessed online via the following link: <https://issuu.com/utrikesdepartementet>.

² Ahlander, *Spelet om Baltikum*; Fredén, *Förvandlingar*; Fredén, *Återkomst*.

³ Lundén and Nilsson, *Sverige och Baltikums frigörelse*; Nilsson and Lundén, *1989 med svenska ögon*.

⁴ Regeringskansliet, *Ett imperium imploderar*, 7. All translations of quotes from Swedish to English are mine, except for those taken from secondary sources in English.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ This was established by Wilhelm M. Carlgren, amongst others: Carlgren, *Sverige och Baltikum*, 48.

⁷ Kuldkepp, "Swedish Political Attitudes," 406-7.

⁸ Ibid., 406-08.

⁹ See e.g. Eriksson, "Coping with a New Security Situation," 62-3.

¹⁰ Kuldkepp, "Swedish Political Attitudes," 413-6.

¹¹ About the non-recognition policy, see Himmer, "The Achievement of Independence in the Baltic States and Its Justifications," 271-2.

¹² About Swedish attitudes towards Baltic state continuity during the Cold War, see Hough, "The Annexation of the Baltic States," 440-3.

¹³ See Arter, *Scandinavian Politics Today*, 368-81; Doeser, *In Search of Security*, 210-1. It should also be noted that at the same time as it was professing its non-alignment, Sweden engaged in secret military cooperation with NATO. See Holmström, *Den dolda alliansen*.

¹⁴ In the 1940s and 1950s, Swedish military intelligence also employed numerous Baltic refugees as its agents. See *Ininbergs, Det svenska spionaget i Baltikum, 1943-1957*.

¹⁵ Kuldkepp, "Swedish Political Attitudes," 417-8.

¹⁶ The quotations are from Palme's speech in the Swedish parliament in 1983: Ahlmark, "Att tiga om Tingsten," 13.

¹⁷ Küng, "Socialdemokraterna och Baltikum," 117.

¹⁸ Doeser, *In Search of Security*, 218-9.

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- ¹⁹ Mark Kramer points out that far from “letting go” of Eastern Europe, the reforms were in many ways explicitly encouraged by Gorbachev, even if the process went further than intended: Kramer, “Realism, Ideology, and the End of the Cold War,” 123-30.
- ²⁰ Doeser, *In Search of Security*, 216-7, 221.
- ²¹ Nilsson and Lundén, *1989 med svenska ögon*, 17.
- ²² For a more developed discussion on the linkage between domestic political concerns and foreign policy, see Doeser, *In Search of Security*, 37-48.
- ²³ Kuldkepp, “Swedish Political Attitudes,” 418. About Bildt’s criticism of the Swedish foreign policy in spring 1990, see Bring, *Neutralitetens uppgång och fall*, 235, Doeser, “Sovjetunionens upplösning och utrikespolitisk förändring i Sverige,” 155 and Küng, “Socialdemokraterna och Baltikum,” 118.
- ²⁴ Arter, *Scandinavian Politics Today*, 408; Miles, “The Nordic Countries and the Fourth EU Enlargement,” 235.
- ²⁵ Joenniemi, “Neutrality Beyond the Cold War,” 292-3.
- ²⁶ Berner, *Soviet Policies toward the Nordic Countries*, 116-7.
- ²⁷ About the changes in Swedish perception of the Soviet threat from 1989 onwards, see Doeser, “Sovjetunionens upplösning och utrikespolitisk förändring i Sverige.”
- ²⁸ See Musiał, “Reconstructing Nordic Significance in Europe.”
- ²⁹ Kuldkepp, “Swedish Political Attitudes,” 401-2.
- ³⁰ See Bergman, “Adjacent Internationalism,” 81-7.
- ³¹ About Swedish internationalism during the Cold War and its global focus, see e.g. Dahl, “Sweden: Once a Moral Superpower, Always a Moral Superpower?,” Doeser, *In Search of Security*, 211-2. Makko, “Sweden, Europe, and the Cold War.”
- ³² Nilsson and Lundén, *1989 med svenska ögon*, 26.
- ³³ Bergman, “Adjacent Internationalism,” 77-81.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 73-4.
- ³⁵ See also Musiał, “Reconstructing Nordic Significance in Europe,” 289-90.
- ³⁶ A similar combination of realist and idealist explanations for the Swedish policy shift has been put forward by others, most notably Kent Zetterberg. See Zetterberg, “Sveriges stöd till Baltikum 1991-1995.”
- ³⁷ Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 221-2.
- ³⁸ See *ibid.*, 9-23.
- ³⁹ Spohr, *Post Wall, Post Square*, 391-2.
- ⁴⁰ About the Baltic Way demonstration, see Eglitis and Ardava, “The Politics of Memory,” 1041-3.
- ⁴¹ Kuldkepp, “Swedish Political Attitudes,” 420.
- ⁴² Nilsson and Lundén, *1989 med svenska ögon*, 23.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ⁴⁴ See Åselius, “Revolutionen under kristallkronorna.”
- ⁴⁵ Kuldkepp, “Swedish Political Attitudes,” 420.
- ⁴⁶ Ahlander, *Spelet om Baltikum*, 11-5, 25-6.
- ⁴⁷ Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 10-6, 40-5, 91-8.
- ⁴⁸ UD, Fredén, Svensk Baltikumpolitik, 12.02.1991.
- ⁴⁹ UD, Ahlander, Baltikum – inför Gorbatjovs besök, 22.05.1991.
- ⁵⁰ See e.g. Jönsson, “Global Governance, Challenges to Diplomatic Communication, Representation and Recognition,” 33.
- ⁵¹ See e.g. Cornut, “To Be a Diplomat Abroad,” 388.
- ⁵² Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 47-8.
- ⁵³ Kuldkepp, “Swedish Political Attitudes,” 421.
- ⁵⁴ UD, Ahlander, Läget i Baltikum i december 1989, 05.12.1989.
- ⁵⁵ UD, Fredén, Svensk Baltikumpolitik, 12.02.1991.
- ⁵⁶ Jönsson, “Global Governance, Challenges to Diplomatic Communication, Representation and Recognition,” 32. For a broader discussion and more examples of covert activities conducted alongside or under the guise of diplomacy, see e.g. Scott, “Secret Intelligence, Covert Action and Clandestine Diplomacy” and Dylan, “Secret Interventions and Clandestine Diplomacy.”
- ⁵⁷ Nilsson and Lundén, *1989 med svenska ögon*, 52.

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- ⁵⁸ UD, Starråker, Utvecklingen i Sovjetunionen/Östra Centraleuropa och dess säkerhetspolitiska konsekvenser, 20.09.1990.
- ⁵⁹ UD, Magnusson, Europa - från splittring till enhet, 25.01.1990.
- ⁶⁰ UD, Fredén, Litauen och Lettland, 01.23.1990.
- ⁶¹ UD, Olsson, Baltikum 1990: fortsatt frigörelse mot självständighet eller bakslag?, 10.02.1990.
- ⁶² Ibid.
- ⁶³ UD, Starråker, Utvecklingen i Sovjetunionen/Östra Centraleuropa och dess säkerhetspolitiska konsekvenser, 20.09.1990.
- ⁶⁴ UD, Fredén, Litauen, vissa PM om 22.03.1990; Olsson, Litauen, 02.04.1990.
- ⁶⁵ UD, Berner, Sovjet och Europa – januari 1991, 01.07.1991. The fears that a Soviet civil war might break out in 1990-1991 were in 2009 recalled by Berner: Nilsson and Lundén, *1989 med svenska ögon*, 19.
- ⁶⁶ UD, Ahlander, Krisen i Baltikum – och Sovjetunionen, 21.01.1991.
- ⁶⁷ Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 51-7.
- ⁶⁸ Küng, "Socialdemokraterna och Baltikum," 118.
- ⁶⁹ UD, Olsson, Litauen, 03.04.1990.
- ⁷⁰ UD, Fredén, Svensk Baltikumpolitik, 12.02.1991.
- ⁷¹ Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 260-2.
- ⁷² UD, Ahlander, Läget i Baltikum i december, 1989 05.12.1989.
- ⁷³ UD, Ahlander, Glimtar från det ryska återuppvaknandet, 28.02.1990.
- ⁷⁴ UD, Berner, Sovjet och Europa – januari 1991, 07.01.1991.
- ⁷⁵ UD, Berner, Den nya ryska revolutionen 19-25 augusti 1991, 26.08.1991.
- ⁷⁶ UD, Berner, Sovjetunionen – det politiska läget försommaren 1990, 19.06.1990.
- ⁷⁷ UD, Lyrvall, Myten om frivillig anslutning, 09.03.1990.
- ⁷⁸ Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 46-7.
- ⁷⁹ UD, Ahlander, Läget i Baltikum i december 1989, 05.12.1989; Ahlander/Fredén, Lettland inför valen den 18 mars, 09.03.1990.
- ⁸⁰ See Carlgren, *Sverige och Baltikum*, 44-45.
- ⁸¹ UD, Ahlander/Fredén, Lettland inför valen den 18 mars, 09.03.1990.
- ⁸² UD, Fredén, Sverige, Baltikum och historien, 09.04.1990.
- ⁸³ UD, Ahlander, Hur skall vi nu förhålla oss till Litauen – och övriga Baltikum?, 20.04.1990.
- ⁸⁴ UD, Ahlander, Samtal med folkfrontsledaren Edgar Savisaar, 26.04.1990.
- ⁸⁵ UD, Ahlander, Samtal med Estlands nye utrikesminister, 27.04.1990.
- ⁸⁶ From a conference presentation in 1995 referred to in Bring, *Neutralitetens uppgång och fall*, 248.
- ⁸⁷ About this designation evoked by Pierre Schori, see Dahl, "Sweden: Once a Moral Superpower, Always a Moral Superpower?," 896-897.
- ⁸⁸ Nilsson and Lundén, *1989 med svenska ögon*, 64.
- ⁸⁹ Kuldkepp, "Swedish Political Attitudes," 422-23; Lundén and Nilsson, *Sverige och Baltikums frigörelse*, 61.
- ⁹⁰ Wahlbäck, *Baltisk befrielse*, 19.
- ⁹¹ UD, Ahlander, Litauens självständighetsförklaring m. m., 15.03.1990.
- ⁹² Nilsson and Lundén, *1989 med svenska ögon*, 36.
- ⁹³ Doeser, *In Search of Security*, 224-5.
- ⁹⁴ See Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 198-199, 244-255.
- ⁹⁵ See in particular UD, Ahlander, Krisen i Baltikum – och Sovjetunionen, 21.01.1991.
- ⁹⁶ Kuldkepp, "Swedish Political Attitudes," 424.
- ⁹⁷ Bergmane, "Is This the End of Perestroika?," 43
- ⁹⁸ Ibid., 44.
- ⁹⁹ Doeser, *In Search of Security*, 228.
- ¹⁰⁰ UD, Olsson, Baltikum 06.02.1991.
- ¹⁰¹ UD, Andersson, Brev till Sjevardenadze 11.01.1991.
- ¹⁰² Doeser, *In Search of Security*, 228-9.
- ¹⁰³ Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 184-85.
- ¹⁰⁴ UD, Ahlander, Baltikum – inför Gorbatsjovs besök, 22.05.1991.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ahlander, *Spelet om Baltikum*, 239-42.

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- ¹⁰⁶ Doeser, *In Search of Security*, 230.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 243-44; Kuldkepp, "Swedish Political Attitudes," 423.
- ¹⁰⁸ See Dunlop, "The August 1991 Coup and Its Impact on Soviet Politics," 116.
- ¹⁰⁹ UD, Berner, Statskuppen, 20.08.1991.
- ¹¹⁰ UD, Berner, Den nya ryska revolutionen 19-25 augusti 1991, 26.08.1991.
- ¹¹¹ Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 222.
- ¹¹² UD, Berner, Den nya ryska revolutionen 19-25 augusti 1991, 26.08.1991.
- ¹¹³ Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 221-2.
- ¹¹⁴ Ibid., 222-3.
- ¹¹⁵ UD, Berner, Utrikes- och säkerhetspolitiska aspekter på utvecklingen i Sovjetunionen efter den misslyckade statskuppen, 06.09.1991.
- ¹¹⁶ Lundén and Nilsson, *Sverige och Baltikums frigörelse*, 37-9.
- ¹¹⁷ UD, Wahlbäck, De baltiska staternas självständighet från svensk säkerhetspolitisk synpunkt, 16.09.1991.
- ¹¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁹ Fredén, *Återkomster*, 36, 9-11.