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Baltic crisis: Nordic and Baltic countries during the end stage of the Cold War

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ABSTRACT

The end of the Cold War was in many ways a formative moment in recent European and global history, but it also had important regional and interregional ramifications. Not least from the Baltic and Nordic perspectives, the events in 1987–1992 marked the definite end of an era, and the beginning of another. As relevant sources from these years have increasingly become available, a research community has emerged to investigate the complexities of international politics in the Baltic-Nordic space during the last years of the Soviet Union and the immediate aftermath of its collapse. This special issue on Nordic and Baltic countries during the end stage of the Cold War is dedicated to furthering research on transnational Nordic-Baltic contacts and perceptions in this period.

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Alongside with Eastern Europe, the Baltic Sea Region was one of the focal points of international attention during the last years of the Cold War. States and international organizations around the world were keeping a close eye on the USSR's Baltic borderlands, widely regarded as a likely flash point where the tensions inherent in the USSR's renewal or disintegration process might come to a head. But the same also held true about the re-emerging Baltic states themselves, and the states in their more immediate regional neighbourhood. Both the Nordic countries (whether neutral or members of NATO) in the west, and what would soon again become the three Baltic states in the east, quickly had to come to terms with the threats and opportunities in the fast-changing international situation.

From a Nordic point of view, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the bipolar, Cold War-dominated world order was a formative moment in their modern history. As Finland and Norway were no longer going to be frontier states on the boundary between capitalism and communism, and as neutral Sweden suddenly found that there was nothing left for it to be 'neutral about',¹ the participants in the so-called Nordic Balance security configuration² had to fundamentally rethink the basic tenets of their foreign policy – a difficult process for states that had settled into their essential policy positions already by the late 1940s to the mid-fifties.³ From the Baltic perspective, the changes were even greater, and arguably nothing short of a full revolution.

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By now, archival sources from these crucial years of 1987–1992 are increasingly available, and many of the leading politicians and other public figures of the period have published memoirs or made their recollections available through witness seminars. Thanks to this, there has emerged a burgeoning research community dedicated to investigating the complexities of international politics during the last years of the Soviet Union and the immediate aftermath of its collapse. This special issue on Nordic and Baltic countries during the end stage of the Cold War is dedicated to furthering this research on transnational Nordic-Baltic contacts and perceptions in these years.

The Nordics and the Baltic crisis of 1987–1991

After World War II, the Nordic states' domestic focus on building up their welfare states, coupled with following the principle of cautiousness in relations with their superpower neighbour, the Soviet Union, had resulted in a kind of regional isolationism committed to not upsetting the status quo in its immediate geographical vicinity.⁴ This policy of careful balancing – facilitated by their fast-growing economies and a relatively stable security situation – was seen as an international success story. The Scandinavian states, and Sweden in particular, built up an international reputation as a successful example of a Third or Middle Way between the two competing superpower blocs.⁵ At the same time, the Nordics largely turned a blind eye to human rights abuses in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.⁶

By the onset of the economic recession in the early 1990s, however, a widespread domestic pessimism had set in regarding the sustainability of the so-called Nordic model. Changes in world economy were putting increasing pressure on the high-tax high-spend Nordic economies and thereby also on their welfare states. The process of European integration, which the Scandinavian states had participated in only to a limited extent (Denmark joined the European Communities in 1973), and that was widely considered to be incompatible with their 'third way' ethos, was becoming ever more important. The end of the Cold War also eroded the internationalist brand that Scandinavia had built up during its decades of active engagement with the Third World.⁷

However, there was light at the end of the tunnel. While the lifting of the iron curtain reduced the predictability of the regional security environment, and stoked fears of the fallout of a possible disorderly break-up of the Soviet Union, there was also hopefulness about the future. The decline of traditional security concerns was opening new and exciting prospects for the spread of Western and Nordic values, democratization, cultural exchange, expansion of markets and investments and environmental activism.

One expression of this optimism was the part-academic, part-political 'New Regionalism' movement, which imagined that an open, liberal, post-modernist, even post-national Baltic Sea Region would be a viable replacement for the apparently obsolete Nordic model – a way forward not only for the post-Soviet Baltic States, but also the post-Nordic Scandinavian states and Finland. Scholars and politicians came to argue that by becoming role models for the Baltic states, and maybe even for post-Soviet Russia, the Nordic countries would be able to preserve their distinctly internationalist profile by shifting their focus to the Baltic Sea Region.⁸

Although the Nordic model (or models) eventually proved stronger than many had feared,⁹ important aspects of this programme came to be realized. From the early 1990s onward, the Nordic countries extensively supported the democratic, economic and social development of the three Baltic states. Initially, this was in order to make sure that they did not turn into ‘failed states’, i. e. sources of further security threats and political instability. Later, the focus turned to their longer-term socialization into the international community. Sweden and Finland, which joined the European Union in 1995, tried to promote EU membership for the Baltic states as a suitable framework for their soft security, whereas Denmark was the first (and initially the only) Nordic country arguing for their NATO membership.¹⁰

At the same time, there was also an important prologue to this positive Nordic engagement with the post-Soviet transition of the Baltic states. These were the policies and strategies adopted by the different Scandinavian states and Finland in the years preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the future of the Baltic republics and the Baltic Sea Region as whole seemed anything but certain, and the success of the Baltic liberation movements was very much in doubt.

What was the combination of structural and ideational factors that eventually facilitated the negotiation of a broad policy compromise in the Baltic question, bringing together different policy interests in the famously consensus-driven Scandinavian political cultures in the name of active engagement, as we could see from the collapse of the USSR onwards? How did Finland, in the end, overcome its reservations which it had had in 1991 regarding the viability of Baltic independence, and how did it reconcile its craving for geopolitical stability in the post-Soviet space with its historical, cultural and political sympathies for the Baltics?

One possible answer would be to suggest that there was some realist political calculation behind the decision to take responsibility for the Baltics’ post-Soviet transition. Certain centre-right Scandinavian politicians, such as Uffe Ellemann-Jensen in Denmark and Carl Bildt in Sweden, seemingly thought that proactive support for Baltic independence was a way forward also for the Scandinavian states because it was more advantageous to be active, rather than passive in this new, complicated and volatile international environment. In a world that was leaving behind the bipolar order and entering an era of multipolarity based on networks of influence, it was the ability to create such networks – and exercise one’s soft power through them – that emerged as a major political asset.

However, there might be reasons to not to overemphasize the break with the previous policy tradition. International activism and norm entrepreneurship were, after all, not new for the Scandinavian countries.¹¹ They had often been the actors who stepped in in the interests of peaceful conflict resolution, democratization and the rule of law. Their foreign aid budgets per capita were the largest in the world. What was unprecedented, however, was the fact that such activities would now be directed at the Baltic countries.

Historically, Nordic attitudes towards Baltic independence had been characterized by a large degree of passivity and cautiousness. In the aftermath of World War I, the view quickly adopted by both the left and the right in Scandinavian politics was that the Nordics should remain devoted to its successful neutrality policy and not become entangled in the question of the future of Russia, since a future re-assertion of Russian

territorial interests in the Eastern Baltic was almost inevitable. These attitudes subsequently seemed to be proven right by events that caused the loss of Baltic independence in 1940–41.¹²

Therefore, when considering the Scandinavian policy shift from Cold War-era passivism to post-Cold War era active engagement for Baltic independence, it is not enough to base the narrative only on the realist aspirations of the new centre-right governments, seeking to retain status and influence in the changing world. We also need to consider the feelings of guilt and shame over past behaviour, and optimism over future cooperation, which increasingly made inroads into the public consciousness in the early 1990s.

In Finland, this dichotomy between *Realpolitik* considerations and deepening societal ties and cultural affinities was particularly acute. Concerns over Finland's own security led the country's political leadership and president Mauno Koivisto in particular to prioritize the internal stability of the Soviet Union over the claims for independence in the Baltic republics until the failed coup in Moscow in August 1991. However, as has been shown by Heikki Rausmaa, this coolness towards the Baltics regaining full sovereignty did not mean that other ways to encourage and support popular and nationalist movements were not utilized. On the contrary, the Finnish government and civil society actors were engaged in active cultural diplomacy and societal interaction with Estonia in particular.¹³

Finally, we also need to consider the different goals and strategies of the different domestic political forces, the role of actors and initiatives above and below the nation state level. Last but not least, we need to account for the differences between the different Nordic countries themselves, who were far from uniform in the ways they tried to come to grips with the situation in the Baltics.

The Baltic point of view

For the Nordic countries, the end of the Cold War was a formative moment, but from the Baltic perspective, it was nothing less than a full-on revolution. This was the case not least in the original sense of the Latin word *revolvō*, meaning to roll back, to turn back in time, or to return to an original state of things.¹⁴ For the Baltics, the end of the Cold War was not merely a move towards normalization after five decades of Communism. Instead, it was an attempt to radically eradicate the present and to return to a fairly distant past. Such attempts are utopian and never successful, and should not be seen as 'a pull on the emergency brake' on the locomotive of history.¹⁵

Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian national movements were poised to restore the pre-war republics that had been destroyed by the Soviets, and for them the pre-war period served as a reservoir of examples to emulate.¹⁶ This return to the roots involved an important geographic dimension: an imagined return to Europe, where the Baltic nations had naturally belonged before World War II. Their perceptions of Europe were romantic, shaped by memories and representations from earlier times. One example is found in the novel *Border State (Piiiriik, 1993)* by the Estonian writer Emil Tode (Tõnu Õnnepalu). His protagonist lives in a Soviet-style concrete-panel apartment block, but contemplates Jean-Antoine Watteau's painting *Pierrot*, and dreams of running away to the boulevards and cafés of Paris.¹⁷

The Baltic national identities were rooted in shared memories, and the key strength of their national movements was the fact that they had managed to maintain 'correct' narratives of their national history. These were passed down to the younger generations as familial, oral narratives and life stories, 'memories of memories', that were entirely separate from the official Soviet version of history.¹⁸ However, the corollary was that for nationalists, there could be only one correct version of history: namely their own. In this sense, they ended up sharing the positivist world view of the Communists.

When the Baltic national movements entered the international arena during and after the re-achievement of Baltic independence, there was indeed very little that was post-modern about their attitudes and behaviour. It was – as one Estonian diplomat remembered – as if Fidel Castro and Che Guevara had taken seats at an international forum.¹⁹ In the minds of the Baltics, their successful struggle for independence had proved them right, and if other countries failed to support them, the problem was not one of the difference of perspectives, but rather one of persuasion. The expectation was that if the Baltics only worked harder to correctly explain their history, all other countries would naturally fall in line, or else proven to be liars. Having just carried out a revolution, the Baltic politicians and diplomats were assertive in their posture and quite dismissive towards Russia, which appeared to be a loser in the post-Cold War world, if not of the Cold War itself.²⁰

The Baltics had another reason for being assertive. Time is of utmost importance in all revolutions, and it was far from certain that the situation would remain favourable for long. The Baltic elites had a sense that their return to the past and to Europe had to be swift, or else risk failure. Partly, this was the result of a fear of losing the momentum for reform.²¹ Partly, they were afraid that there would not be much time before Russia regained its strength and would be able to obstruct their return to Europe.

Consequently, the Baltic national movements looked upon the Nordic countries with much admiration for their economic strengths and for their powerful international status,²² but also with a strong sense of self-righteousness and impatience with the doubts and ambivalence they could see in Nordic policy positions. Such sentiments were very much visible already before the regaining of independence, encapsulated neatly by the remark of the Lithuanian leader Vytautas Landsbergis in spring 1990: 'Sweden is sleeping'.²³ Estonia, which had close ties to Finland, was likewise impatient with it, particularly regarding the Finnish views on the human-rights (minorities) situation in Estonia, and their desire to mediate from a neutral position between Estonia and Russia in the CSCE/OSCE framework. From the Estonian point of view, Finland rather lagged behind the US/Western European point of view, which seemed to be more supportive.

The Nordic ambivalence continued to some extent in the 1990s. During the premiership of Carl Bildt, Sweden played an active and extremely helpful role in the Baltics, especially in connection with the withdrawal of Russian troops. The return of the Social Democrats in September 1994 immediately defused this Swedish activism in the Baltics. Finland remained extremely worried about the prospect of the expansion of NATO close to its borders, seeing it as an introduction of an element of instability. But at the same time, Helsinki and Stockholm were relieved that they were not tasked with providing security to the eastern Baltic as an alternative to NATO expansion, an option, which at the time was seriously discussed by German and US officials.²⁴ Only Denmark won the unqualified admiration of Baltic diplomats for being not only the only Nordic country to

support their NATO membership, but also for making lobbying on behalf of the Balts into their own useful niche in Euro-Atlantic politics. By that point, Denmark had made a remarkable break with its 1980s 'footnote policy in NATO' in favour of Atlanticism, something that brought them much goodwill from their US ally.²⁵

As is inevitable for all revolutionaries, the early post-revolutionary period was full of frustration. The world was a different place from what the Baltic nationalists had imagined it to be. Youthful idealism and self-righteousness became more tempered over time. Nevertheless, a strong continuity remains inherent to the culture of Baltic diplomacy,²⁶ later enforced by the successful accession of the Baltic states to the EU and NATO, and the relative stability that these organizations provided.

Contributions to the special issue

This special issue contains five articles, each dealing with some facet of Baltic-Nordic contacts in these crucial years, but also considering this regional interchange in a wider European and international context. Two of the articles are dedicated to Sweden. Thomas Lundén's contribution examines the role of cultural and humanitarian institutions, especially the Swedish Institute (SI) and the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) as some of the earliest agents of Swedish soft power in the Baltics. Mart Kuldkepp's article similarly deals with Swedish engagement with the Baltics in the pre-independence era, but this time looking at the activities of Swedish diplomats 'on the ground' in the Baltic republics and Russia, as precursors of the pro-Baltic policy shift in Sweden that was to come in autumn 1991.

A Danish case study is provided by Mikkel Runge Olesen's contribution examining the reasons why the Danish foreign policy became more activist vis-à-vis the Baltic states, and seeing this process as a premonition for the broader sentiment of activism that came to dominate Danish foreign policy thinking in the post-Cold War period. Juha-Matti Ritvanen investigates the evolution of Finnish foreign policy towards the Baltics in these years, emphasizing the division that emerged between the caution exercised at the highest level and a more sympathetic and supportive popular opinion, as well as the dependence of Finnish policy on the developments in the USSR. Finally, Kaarel Piirimäe provides a Baltic perspective in his study of Gorbachev's 'New Thinking' (NT) and the devolution of foreign political decision-making from the centre to the union republics, which facilitated the development of direct Baltic contacts with the West, bypassing Moscow.

Notes

1. Quoted from Ringmar, *Re-imagining Sweden*, 45.
2. About the Nordic Balance, see Arter, *Scandinavian Politics Today*, 368–81.
3. This point is made by Lars Fredén in *Förvandlingar*, 243–44.
4. See Musiał, *Reconstructing Nordic Significance*, 291.
5. About the international framing of Sweden during the Cold War, see Marklund, *The Social Laboratory*.
6. See the analysis by Küng, "Socialdemokraterna och Baltikum."
7. About these developments, see e.g. Musiał, *Reconstructing Nordic Significance*; Ingebritsen, *Redefining National Security*; and Bergman, *Adjacent Internationalism*.

8. See the programmatic article by Wæver, “Nordic Nostalgia”; and analyses by Yndigegn, “National Borders”; and Williams, *Zur Konstruktion einer Region*.
9. See Andersson, *What Activates an Identity?*
10. See Bergman, *Adjacent Internationalism*.
11. See Ingebrietsen, *Norm Entrepreneurs*.
12. See Kuldkepp, *Swedish Political Attitudes*, 406–417.
13. Rausmaa, *Kyllä kulttuurin nimissä voi harrastella aika paljon*.
14. See Snow, *The Concept of Revolution*. The meaning of ‘revolution’ has been ambiguous since it first began to be used as a political concept.
15. Lagerspetz, *Postsocialism as a Return*, 380, citing Walter Benjamin through Iring Fetscher.
16. Pettai, *Framing the Past*; Pettai and Pettai, *Transitional and Retrospective Justice*; Jõesalu, *The Role of the Soviet Past*; Lehti et al., *Never-Ending Second World War*; Mälksoo, *The Memory Politics of Becoming European*; Kuus, *Geopolitics Reframed*; and Piirimäe and Grönholm, *Historical Consciousness*.
17. Once he is Paris, the Eastern European protagonist does not know what to dream of. Tode, *Piiririk*, 60–61. See also Snel, “Trespassers and Stowaways”; and Jaanus, *Estonia’s Time*.
18. Rakfeldt, *Home Environments*, 514.
19. Interview with Toivo Klaar, 11 April 2021, recording in possession of Kaarel Piirimäe.
20. About the Baltic diplomatic culture, see Pundziute-Gallois, *Cultures Diplomatiques*.
21. Laar, *Ajaga võidu*; Laar, *Pööre*. The former Estonian Prime Minister Mart Laar entitled his memoirs *Race against Time*.
22. Rakfeldt, *Home Environments*, 528.
23. Ahlander, *Mäng Baltikumi pärast*, 86. About how this impatience exasperated the Finnish President, see Koivosto, *Witness to History*, 220.
24. Meeting with Richard Holbrooke, 27 June 1995, Washington embassy memos, Estonian Foreign Ministry, Tallinn.
25. Archer, *Nordic swans*.
26. This is the implication in Pundziute-Gallois, *Cultures Diplomatiques*.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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