

Baltic-Nordic-US cooperation as a vehicle for democratic change

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20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Nordic-Baltic region stands out as Europe's success story. The Baltic countries, which were seen by many as potential sources of tension in the early 1990s, have become stable democracies, firmly anchored in the Western institutions. The whole region has benefitted from the opening up of borders and the free movement of people, goods and capital; and in the aftermath of the 2008-2009 economic crisis it has become the corner of Europe where prudent and timely - in some cases even radical - measures have led to energetic economic growth, unburdened by excessive government debt. At the same time, cooperation in the field of security is also increasing. Not only do the proposals outlined in the Stoltenberg report promise to take Nordic cooperation to an entirely new level (with follow-up reports extending the planning also to the Baltic states), but different bilateral and trilateral arrangements are criss-crossing the Baltic Sea, inspiring outsiders to study the area as a model of regional cooperation worth following or learning from.

The Baltic-Nordic countries (henceforth, also referred to as the NB8) already have considerable experience in "exporting" their success story, working together to help reforms in countries that are currently undergoing democratic transitions or aiming to join NATO or the EU. This paper makes a case for bringing the issue of helping transitional democracies to the forefront of the Nordic-Baltic-US agenda too, as working together could magnify the results and benefit everyone involved.

Where should we engage?

Over the last two decades, the concept of democracy-promotion has been both idolized and demonized. The successful transition of Eastern Europe and the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine have been interpreted as proof that democratization is a natural course of affairs; but the rollback of the Ukrainian Orange revolution, the Georgian war and especially the difficulties faced in Iraq and Afghanistan have made the West wary of over-commitment and reluctant to be a sponsor, not to mention an executor, of regime change.

Ironically, at exactly the moment when the words "democracy" and "freedom" seemed on the verge of being expelled from the Western political rhetorical vocabulary, the North African revolutions brought the issue of democratic change and the associated policy dilemmas back onto the agenda. While the legitimacy and wisdom of sponsoring democratic regime change remains a matter of debate, it is nonetheless a fact that a great number of countries have brought down autocratic rulers and could benefit from informed advice and help in building up new and more democratic systems.

This paper has been written with the post-Soviet and Balkan democracies in mind. Being in Europe and aspiring to create a working relationship with Western organizations (depending on the country, these aspirations can range from a pragmatic economic relationship with Europe to the full membership of both the EU and NATO) these states need to modernize their systems of government and adopt a considerable number of EU and/or NATO rules and procedures, placing the Baltic and Nordic countries with their combined experience in a perfect position to help.

However, the recipient countries' will to reform can fluctuate, depending on the nature of their political leadership, on whether or not they have a realistic prospect of full membership in the EU and/or NATO, and whether or not this prospect, if present, inspires them to conduct reforms. These factors explain why during recent years the focus of Nordic-Baltic outreach activities has shifted from Georgia and Ukraine to the Balkans. However, the question of whether it is wise to "abandon" a target country where the will to reform is floundering for whatever reason remains. Those countries that fail to be inspired by the prospects of membership or to be attracted by the ideals of democracy might still be interested in making changes for the sake of trade with Europe.

In North Africa, the outlines of the emerging political systems or the countries' international ambitions are unclear; in fact, the whole region is still very turbulent, with violence ranging in Syria and Libya. Also, the Arab world is probably less comprehensible culturally to the NB8 group than the post-Soviet or Balkan countries. However, once the dust has settled, it may well turn out that much of the practical reform experience of the Baltic states and the tutorship experience of the Nordic states can also be useful outside Europe.

Why the Baltic-Nordic tutorship team works

*Together, the Baltic and Nordic countries possess vast experience in outreach policy that is hard to rival. The Baltic states' financial resources may be scarce – although the sums spent on development aid are steadily growing – but they have firsthand reform experience that provides unique insights and equips them with informed views on a wide range of relevant issues. These range from fundamental political issues (such as the advantages and disadvantages of different constitutional arrangements) and practical legislative questions (for example, how to implement programs such as NATO's Membership Action Plan or how best to harmonize domestic laws with those of the EU's *acquis communautaire*) through practical diplomacy (how to promote your case internationally, how to work with different EU institutions during the accession period, etc) to managing public opinion at home.

The Nordic Countries, by contrast, are better off financially and have a long history of being aid-donors in very different parts of the world.

*The Baltic and Nordic countries share a similar worldview: promoting democracy and good governance in their own and the EU's neighborhood is seen as a serious strategic issue rather than an act of charity.

*While enthusiasm for outreach and the targeting preferences of individual countries may vary, depending among other issues on the political leaders in power at any particular moment, the Nordic and Baltic countries are generally still united by a “let’s get things done” attitude.

*The Nordic-Baltic world consists of small states – none can overshadow the others, make them appear as mere satellites. Cooperation is a necessity not only when it comes to pooling resources, but also when it comes to gaining international support for and attention to issues and initiatives that are considered important by the NB8.

*Egalitarian cultures and small bureaucracies make things easier. The decision-making process tends to be a lot quicker in the Nordic-Baltic world than, say, in the bigger European countries that have bigger bureaucracies. There are already good personal links between policy-makers and civil servants in different NB8 countries; people know their counterparts and potentially bothersome questions can often be solved by a few phone calls.

*Between them, the Nordic-Baltic countries possess wide-ranging regional expertise concerning the target countries. The Nordics, for example, have already been engaged in the Balkans for a few decades; among their politicians and senior civil servants are people who have long historical memories and personal experiences of the region. One can also meet Balkan immigrants to the Nordic states who, having once arrived as refugees, have now become MPs or civil servants and work to enhance their new homelands’ capabilities to help their former homelands.

The Baltic states have a comparative advantage in the post-Soviet world. They know the peculiarities of the Soviet system and the special features of post-Soviet transition; they can serve as living proof that given sufficient political will, post-Soviet chaos can be turned into functioning democracy – which lends them lots of credibility in the target countries. Although 20 years have brought along an important generational change, there are still many people in the Baltics who not only speak Russian, but also have personal relationships dating from the perestroika years with politicians in countries such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. Adapting to post-Soviet business cultures and living conditions can be easier for Baltic diplomats than for their Nordic counterparts.

One should also not dismiss the opportunities created by “special relationships” between individual countries: for example the trust and goodwill that Estonia seems to enjoy in Georgia.

*Of the 8 Nordic and Baltic countries, Sweden and Finland remain outside NATO and Norway and Iceland are not members of the EU. Only Estonia and Finland are members of the Eurozone. While these non-overlapping memberships can occasionally complicate regional cooperation around the Baltic sea, they may actually serve as an asset when it comes to outreach policy. Among the target countries, some are deeply suspicious of NATO, but would like to be closer to the EU. Others see NATO-membership as their highest priority, but fail to be inspired by the EU. Still others would like to improve their quality of governance and their practical ties to the West without (yet) considering potential membership in Western organizations. The Nordic-Baltic group includes suitable partners or role models for them all.

Ways to improve cooperation

In 2007, the International Centre for Defence Studies in Estonia and the Swedish Defence Research Agency conducted a study on ways to improve Nordic-Baltic assistance in security sector reform in third countries. A number of recommendations made by the authors can be adapted to apply to the entire spectrum of outreach activities. These include:

- A joint Nordic-Baltic conference on outreach activities should be held. On the political level the conference could be devoted to setting the strategic priorities and agenda for the future, but it should also serve as a meeting place for civil servants and experts who are engaged in outreach activities, allowing them to exchange experiences and contributing to the creation of “an outreach community”.
- A Nordic-Baltic coordination committee for joint outreach activities should be formed. The aim would be to create a venue for information exchange, thereby making it possible to avoid duplication and enable the informed use of different countries’ comparative advantages and strengths.
- A database should be set up where all states concerned list their assets, including expertise, that are available for outreach activities.
- The Nordic and Baltic states should launch a common initiative on how to better coordinate EU and NATO outreach activities.
- Joint Nordic-Baltic working/research groups should be initiated to investigate how to evaluate different outreach activities in regions where joint activities have been conducted.
- Jointly run centers could be established for training the civil servants, military or future politicians of target countries. The Baltic Defence College in Tartu and the Eastern Partnership Training Centre in Tallinn already perform these functions, but the courses there might be in need of greater substance. The need for complementary courses, specially tailored study tours and other regular or ad hoc activities should also be explored.

Why welcome the US to the club?

*The political incentive to invite the US to join the Baltic-Nordic countries’ outreach activities is obvious. 20 years ago the Baltic-Nordic region was a recipient of an extraordinary amount of US attention - the Baltic states as a security issue in need of a solution, and the Nordics as experts in the area. Now that type of attention is no longer there, but to become a primary partner of the US in helping transitional democracies would help the region to maintain a close working relationship with Washington.

*The US, being the sole global superpower is clearly overstretched; not only financially and militarily, but also when it comes to attention and expertise. By engaging with the Baltic-Nordic

expert-networks, the US could get regular and institutional access to a vast pool of expertise on the target countries that it otherwise might lack.

*While the EU as a whole often displays a worrying tendency to imitate policy-making rather than engage in it, and sees international visibility as a goal in itself rather than as a byproduct of successful policies, the Baltic-Nordic countries still tend to be goal-oriented. Although their means are more modest, they share the “can-do” attitude of the US – which should make them an agreeable partner for Washington.

*The US involvement would also help to raise the profile of the target countries in organizations such as NATO and the OSCE, and also the EU.

*It could also lend our advice more credibility in the eyes of recipient countries – although care must be taken to ensure that US involvement is not misinterpreted as a binding political commitment to support certain politicians or a target country’s membership in organizations such as NATO.

*However, the day may come when the question of NATO and EU membership for the transitional democracies, including those in the post-Soviet world, comes back onto the international agenda. Managing this will be a difficult task, making the involvement of American diplomatic and intellectual power indispensable.

The Russia question

Helping democracy in the post-Soviet world and maintaining a working relationship with Russia are often seen as contradictory goals – but this does not need to be the case. In fact, when Russia has sought some harmony with the Western world (such as in the late 1990s and the early 2000s) it has also sought a working relationship with its democratizing neighbors, and sometimes even tried to learn from them. But when Russia has thought it can dictate terms to the West and positioned itself as the latter’s geopolitical adversary (for example, in the years 2004-2008), Russia’s post-Soviet pro-Western neighbors have been the first to feel the heat. It is also important to realize that Russia’s antagonism has been inspired by fear – the color revolutions, for example, made Moscow panic in expectation of a domino effect; in order to preserve the ruling regime’s security at home, tarnishing the image of and spoiling relations with countries undergoing democratic regime change became important.

At the time of writing, Russia is yet again at a crossroads and it is hard to predict what kind of attitude it will adopt towards the West during the possible propaganda wars of the upcoming election campaign and once the new presidential term has started. However, whatever course Moscow adopts, the West should not make its work with transitional democracies dependent on Russia’s goodwill, but rather see it as a strategic goal in its own right. In the long run, to be surrounded by democracies will help democratic instincts also in Russia itself – and a Russia that respects (even if it does not yet follow) the democratic way of life will always be a more effective partner to the West than an arrogantly authoritarian Russia, fearfully guarding its “zone of privileged interests”.

Summary

Regardless of the ideological fashions of the day, democratic reform will be part of the practical political agenda for a great (and probably increasing) number of countries in the coming years.

It is in the strategic interest of the West that these processes – regardless of where they take place - are successful. While the decisive role will always be played by the elites and people of the reforming countries themselves, outsiders should help to the extent they can. To this end, combining the outreach efforts of the Nordic and Baltic countries and the US could be very effective: the recent reform experiences of the Baltics, coupled with the Scandinavian “business-culture” of the Nordics and the political muscle of the United States can result in a formidable team.

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