



ANALYSIS

## UNDER PRESSURE

THE NORDIC-BALTIC COOPERATION DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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Cover page photo: Trucks are stuck in a traffic jam stretching more than 65 km towards Berlin from the German-Polish border near the eastern German town of Frankfurt (Oder) due to travel restrictions to counteract the spread the new coronavirus COVID-19 on March 18, 2020. Poland re-opened the border for cars today for returning Polish nationals and transit to the Baltic EU states. (Photo by Odd Andersen / AFP / Scanpix)

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In theory, the geographical vulnerability of the Nordic-Baltic region is well acknowledged. The Baltic states are locked in the north-eastern corner of Europe with the Nordic countries across the Baltic Sea and the only land route to Western Europe running through Poland. In the spring of 2020, this knowledge turned from theory to practice. A close working relationship among the Baltic states eased the handling of the COVID-19 crisis, while Poland's restoration of its border controls and subsequent behaviour can be counted as one of the most significant episodes in the regional affairs of the recent past.

The pandemic crisis revealed the known political

undercurrents of the Nordic-Baltic region and the world, turning abstract discussions into practical examples. The Baltic countries came together in a time of need, cooperation with the Nordic countries was solely pragmatic, regional multilateral cooperation fell down, and China's growing influence and US unwillingness to step up became clear. Moreover, when facing an unexpected shock, countries tend to look inwards.

However, the opportunity to rely on friends, partners and allies is the key to easing any

<sup>1</sup> This short analysis grew out of a study ordered by the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the summer of 2020, see: Kristi Raik (ed.), Piret Kuusik, Maili Vilson, and Frank Jüris, [Koronakriis ja väljakutsed Eesti välispoliitikale](#) [Coronacrisis and challenges to the Estonian foreign policy] (Tallinn: RKK Eesti Välispoliitika Instituut, 2020). The study asked the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute/ICDS to assess the ministry's management of the COVID-19 crisis and its effects on Estonia's foreign policy. Thus, the following analysis serves as a complimentary paper focusing on regional cooperation in the Nordic-Baltic region during the spring of 2020. While the paper's overall approach is regional, it is inevitably Estonia-centric as the primary research materials (e.g. interviews with diplomats and officials) focused on Estonia.

crisis, as was shown in the spring of 2020. Thus, nurturing good relations still continues to be the most important and valuable instrument in the foreign-policy toolbox.

## 1. THE VIRUS FROM THE FAR EAST

Overall, the countries in the region did well in responding to the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic between March and June 2020. According to the Sustainable Development Report for 2020, Latvia is second in the world for its response, while Lithuania and Estonia come fourth and fifth respectively. The picture for the Nordic countries is more mixed: Norway holds 10th place, Denmark 12th, Finland 14th and Sweden 22nd; Poland is 21st. The

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methodology considers the mortality rate, the virus's reproduction rate and the effectiveness of control measures.<sup>2</sup>

Until mid-March, countries in the region felt confident in responding to the pandemic, with governments providing reassurances about their preparedness. In the third and fourth week of March, the tables turned, and governments began rapidly closing public spaces and limiting travel. Borders started to be reinstated from 14 March, with Finland being the last to have a functioning connection with Estonia until 22 March when commuter travellers were no longer allowed to travel between Tallinn and Helsinki. Transit for goods continued with no restrictions, apart from with Poland.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Sachs, Guido Schmidt-Traub, Christian Kroll, Guillaume Lafortune, Grayson Fuller, and Finn Woelm, [The Sustainable Development Goals and COVID-19: Sustainable Development Report 2020](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 20.

Their quick reaction and the public acceptance of lockdown measures was driven by the news from Italy, where the severity of the outbreak and the resulting stress on the health sector provided a real-time picture of how serious the situation might become. Initial confidence faded quickly as the lack of testing kits and protective equipment rapidly undermined the governments' and the public's belief in managing the crisis successfully.

A pattern emerged whereby countries focused almost solely on domestic affairs. Little attention was paid to how internal restrictions and rules would affect neighbouring countries and their citizens. However, this was not unique to the region, with similar behaviour taking place cross Europe and in other parts of the world.

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In the interviews with Estonian officials conducted for this study, two sets of criticism were expressed. First, the pandemic should not have come as a surprise to leaders in the region. Though the information was fragmented and its truthfulness contested, the first signs of the virus occurred in December 2019, with the situation accelerating in China during January 2020 and later in Italy. Somewhat superficial attitudes in the region can be justified since previous pandemics such as SARS at the beginning of the 2000s and bird flu at the end of the 1990s did not have a significant effect on the countries of the Nordic-Baltic region in comparison to East Asian countries. It was therefore hard to see whether and how the virus would affect the region. However, this raises a question: in the event of future global events that might significantly affect the region, who should be responsible for

highlighting the potential “danger”? The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as the institution most connected to the rest of the world, or issue-specific institutions, such as the Health Board in this case?

Second, diplomats expressed disappointment at the inward-looking policies and behaviour that countries exercised in the region and Europe more widely. The governments' sole focus on domestic needs without considering the effects on partners and allies was an unwelcome surprise as the pursuit for solidarity and cooperation is the *modus operandi* of today's Europe.

From the perspective of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this crisis was first and foremost a consular issue. Following the travel restrictions and the Estonian government's call for citizens to return home in the first instance, the ministry went to unusual lengths to support people in returning. Some diplomats noted that the ministry was like a travel agency for a couple of weeks. Three lessons can be taken for the future. First, consular services may be expensive, but they are a fundamental part of the ministry's responsibilities. In a time of crisis, consular service is an irreplaceable support for citizens, and any plans for financial cuts and reforms should bear this in mind. Second, the crisis revealed the wide scope of travel that Estonian citizens undertake. Pressure is growing to extend consular services in countries previously not well known to Estonia. Thus, to meet the challenge, serious consideration should be given at the EU level on how to make better use of the Union's wide network of representations and connections across the world. Finally, as Tallinn is not the regional air travel hub, Estonia relies heavily on its neighbours' airports in Riga, Helsinki and Warsaw. Facilitating people's movements in the region becomes a significant factor in a crisis such as was experienced in the spring of 2020.

## 2. CUTTING THE CHAIN: POLAND'S REIMPOSITION OF BORDERS

Poland decided to close its borders overnight on 14/15 March. The primary land connection between the north-eastern corner of Europe and the rest runs through Poland. In illustrative terms, Poland's closure of the border was the equivalent of closing off the middle part of a chain, with people and goods stuck on each side of the country.

In practical terms, this meant that Baltic citizens who were urged by their governments to return home as soon as possible found themselves stuck on the German-Polish border. Freedom of transit remained through Denmark, Sweden and Finland, with many using the opportunity to take this uncommon route home. In addition, Baltic governments provided alternative modes of transportation, either by train or ship from Germany.<sup>3</sup> Transport of goods through Poland was allowed, but stringent rules resulted in long delays and complex border crossings.

Analysing Poland's actions results in mixed and somewhat contradictory conclusions. Today, relations have normalised and there is no visible hostility between the Baltic states and Poland. However, some long-term lingering feelings seem to remain.

Warsaw realised the consequences of its actions on relations with its allies when the Baltic states asked whether it would react the same way during a military crisis. Estonia brought the issue up in the North Atlantic Council and with the White House.<sup>4</sup> Warsaw was surprised that the Baltic states made this connection. While other arguments such as

Baltic citizens being unable to return home and pressure from Germany and the European Commission did not change Warsaw's position, the references to a military crisis seemed to do the trick.

On reflection, it seems that Poland's actions were based not on political calculations but rather on administrative decisions, with political

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consequences not being considered. Warsaw's somewhat stubborn and hectic actions were caused by a failure of governance and bureaucracy and not by decision-makers' ill will.

This is the core of the matter when talking about long-term effects on Estonia's foreign policy. The driving principle of Estonia's foreign and security policy since the 1990s has been "never alone". This is the belief that, for Estonia to thrive and defend itself, it needs allies, friends and partners. For the past 30 years, therefore, Estonia's primary aim in this area has been to gain as many allies as possible and have the strongest possible relations. Regional allies, including Poland, are an important part of this policy.

Tim Marshall says in his book *Prisoners of Geography* that geography is a fundamental part of the question of what happens in international affairs and why: "nature is more powerful than man".<sup>5</sup> Building relations and ensuring allies is an attempt to overcome this nature. Spring 2020 reminded us that this can go only so far and, while political will may exist, support and help may fall down due to administrative failure. First, this raises a question about the reliability of allies and

<sup>3</sup> "Tallinki erilaev toob eestlased Saksamaalt koju" [Tallink's special ship brings Estonians home from Germany], ERR, 17 March 2020.

<sup>4</sup> "Eesti tõstatas Poola piiri teema NATO-s ja USA-s" [Estonia brought up the Polish border issue in NATO and the US], ERR, 19 March 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics* (London: Elliott & Thompson, 2015).

partners (for Estonia, and also the other Baltic states and the Nordics): how sure can they be of their allies' help and support? Second, it is a reminder that, even with best efforts, support may still fail to come through at a critical point.

### 3. THE THREE MUSKETEERS

Overall cooperation between the three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—was very good. Spring 2020 showed that diplomats, officials and politicians in the three countries are used to working closely with their counterparts and that reliance on personal contacts is high. This facilitated access to necessary information and organising peoples'

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movement through the three countries. At the political level, good cooperation came to the fore in two instances: pressuring Poland and creating the so-called "Baltic Bubble". The three countries actively worked on restoring the free movement of people through setting common standards and assessment to count infections and evaluate risk levels. This resulted in the Baltic Bubble being the first multi-country area in the EU to restore free movement of people in May 2020.<sup>6</sup>

While Poland was an issue in the early stages of the crisis, creating the conditions for opening the three Baltic states to mutual free movement began early on and has been a continuing theme in their relations for the past nine months. During the autumn, when infection numbers started to increase at differing rates, the agreement on the Baltic Bubble collapsed.

This further confirms the general pattern of Baltic collaboration, whereby practical cooperation does not automatically translate into cooperation on political matters and vice versa. For example, in the summer of 2020, the diverging positions of the three countries on energy security led Lithuanian president Gitanas Nausėda to decide not to attend the traditional meeting with his two counterparts.

Looking to the future, recommendations can be made in structuring the crisis response between the three countries. Baltic trilateral cooperation worked well in the spring of 2020, but it relied heavily on personal relations and ad hoc arrangements. The study recommends taking a more structured approach to crisis management. Joint consideration by the three countries of different crisis scenarios, institutions involved and lines of communication would benefit any type of unusual event that might occur in the region or may affect it in the future. This type of planning takes place in military affairs, but it has not spilled over to civilian affairs in the Baltic states.

### 4. WORKING WITH THE NORDICS

Cooperation between Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden is highly institutionalised and is a primary example of well-functioning regional cooperation in the world. Naturally, Nordic cooperation has its problems and challenges, but a general commitment to working together is present and in action. Thus, the disagreement that emerged between the Nordic countries in the spring of 2020 over how to manage the crisis and subsequent bitter exchanges was a surprise.

<sup>6</sup> ["Coronavirus: Baltic states open a pandemic 'travel bubble'."](#) BBC News, 15 May 2020.

The source of contention was Sweden, whose different approach to handling the coronavirus epidemic made it difficult for other countries to justify allowing movement of people from and to Sweden. When borders began opening in June, Denmark, Finland and Norway opted to maintain border restrictions with Sweden, with media outlets and some politicians expressing criticism of the Swedish approach to tackling the virus. Stockholm, on the other hand, felt it was being unfairly criticised and considered that it shared the aim of tackling the virus and only differed in the method. The disagreement and bitterness over the issue pushed the Swedish foreign minister, Ann Linde, to express concern over how the coronavirus crisis had damaged Nordic cooperation, with Swedish diplomats and officials defending the Swedish approach in European capitals and media outlets.<sup>7</sup>

The same can be said about Swedish-Baltic relations, where in June and July there were concerns about how to politely refuse Swedish attempts to open borders and allow movement of people and officials.

In Estonia's experience, Finland was very attentive to Sweden's behaviour in the early weeks of the crisis, allowing the conclusion to be drawn that Finland's initial slow reaction in the first week of the pandemic in March was partly caused by Sweden's measures and actions to halt the pandemic. In addition, Finland is known to be somewhat self-interested in the positive sense of the term. Its history and behaviour during the spring showed that Finland does not hesitate to put its national interests first, which is well

acknowledged in theory and now seen in practice.<sup>8</sup>

Estonia was the driver of Estonian-Finnish cooperation, with a bilateral working group established on 21 March. This was necessary as the extent of connections between Finland and Estonia is different to those between their

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other neighbours. In March, the Finnish government barred commuting between Finland and Estonia (with some exceptions), asking people who worked in Finland but lived in Estonia or vice versa to stay in one country or the other. Most of the 15,400 Estonian residents who work abroad do so in Finland.<sup>9</sup> In addition, roughly 70,000 Estonians have some form of residency in Finland; around 9,000 Finns live in Estonia.<sup>10</sup> This means that large numbers of people cross the Gulf of Finland regularly for purposes other than tourism, while connections with the other Baltic states are not as regular, apart from Valga and Valka on the Latvian-Estonian border.

It is believed in Estonia that Finland is our closest partner and Estonia and Finland arguably share some form of brotherhood. However, this was not seen in the spring. Estonia has a very well-informed embassy in Helsinki and many challenges were resolved thanks to the extensive network of Estonian diplomats. Nevertheless, the Finnish government did not make any exceptions for Estonians or give any preferential treatment.

<sup>7</sup> "No reason to keep Swedes out when Nordics reopen borders: Swedish Minister," Reuters, 26 May 2020; Raimo Poom, "Rootsi valitsus tegi järelepärimise peaminister Ratase piiri avamise sõnavõtu kohta," [Swedish government asked about prime minister Rata's declaration about opening the borders], *Delfi*, 16 May 2020; Richard Milne, "Architect of Sweden's no-lockdown strategy insists it will pay off," *Financial Times*, 8 May 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Kristi Raik, "The Coronavirus Crisis Has Brought New Realism to Estonian-Finnish Relations," ICDS Blog, 25 June 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Eesti Pank (Bank of Estonia), "Tööturu ülevaade" [Overview of the labour market], 1/2020, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Embassy of Estonia in Helsinki, "Estonia and Finland," 14 May 2020.

## 5. NO SIGNS OF MULTILATERALISM

The crisis showed that the Nordic-Baltic countries can work together, communicating bilaterally and in groups of two or three. However, this cooperation does not translate into cooperation at the multilateral level. Estonia held the presidency of the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) group. The format gathered virtually three times during the spring and reaffirmed the political commitment to ensuring free transit and consular cooperation in the region. However, the NB8 format did not act as a platform for active coordination and cooperation among the eight countries.

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This is normal, as the multilateral Nordic-Baltic platforms in general tend to be a stage for declaratory statements and confirming willingness to work together, resulting in little practical cooperation with tangible results. In the context of the coronavirus crisis, an important factor contributing to the lack of multilateral cooperation was arguably the failure of Nordic cooperation. Nordic-Baltic cooperation tends to rely heavily on collaboration between the Nordic countries, which the three Baltic states are then invited to join. It would be somewhat exceptional for a Baltic country to actively lead NB8 cooperation, which has so far been driven by the Nordics.

In the crisis response, it emerged that personal relations among the Nordic-Baltic leaders are close. This is probably a side effect of, or is reinforced by, European integration, whereby

regular contact through meetings of the European Council adds to close personal relationships that then come into play in regional and bilateral cooperation. In Estonia's case, it revealed the various levels on which diplomacy and communication with neighbours takes place. Communication between leaders and officials ran in parallel with diplomats working in the capitals and in the foreign ministry with little crossover, revealing a lack of coordination and communication between different levels of government. This raises a question: where is the centre of regional diplomacy—in the office of the prime minister or in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs? On the one hand, there is an easy fix: better coordination and communication will improve the workings

of the foreign affairs' governmental machinery. On the other, the crisis demonstrates how international the position of the prime minister has become. The latter's office coordinates not only its own government and domestic forces, but also with regional leaders, similar to the operation of the cabinet in a horizontal political space.<sup>11</sup>

## 6. MOVING FORWARD...

Diplomats interviewed for this paper all expressed disappointment with the way countries behaved. In normal circumstances, cooperation and relations in Europe and the region are very active and close. However, the lack of immediate cooperation, solidarity and togetherness is a stark reminder that governments are first and foremost responsible for their electorate and domestic audience. International cooperation is a secondary objective despite growing globalisation and deepening integration, which feed into the perception of the world as a "global village".

<sup>11</sup> Chris Bickerton, *The European Union: A Citizen's Guide* (London: Pelican Books, 2016), 227.

Second, Estonia's international relations and presence is both deep and wide. Many diplomats expressed surprise at how integrated the countries of the region are. While trade figures and the movement of people indicate close relations, the real extent of business and people's connections came to the fore when free movement was restricted. Thus, regional cooperation must continue in a positive direction and governments should seek ways to further facilitate relations with neighbours. After all, the crisis showed that Estonia needs its neighbours and therefore any praise and criticism of them must be calculated and deliberate, and consider the effects it may have. To instrumentalise neighbours in order to score domestic political points or buff up Estonia's image only harms Tallinn's long- and short-term foreign policy objectives.

Intense consular work in the first weeks of the crisis indicated the wide extent of citizens' travel. Estonians were scattered around the

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world, prompting further thinking on how to better provide consular services in the case of small government structures such as in Estonia. One solution may be to increase the EU's competences in consular affairs, widening the role of EU representations in countries around the world. Another solution, already in use to varying degrees among Nordic countries and EU member states, is to collaborate with countries with widespread global networks, allowing their consular representations to provide a wider set of services to citizens of other member states.

For Estonia specifically, society's high level of digitalisation allowed a smooth continuation of essential government and business services. Widespread use of digital signatures and broad

access to government services meant that people and students were able to continue working and organising their daily lives without any significant disruption. Thus, Estonia's image as a digital country and champion of digitalisation was enhanced, with other governments and international organisations expressing strong interest in Estonia's solutions. For example, the Estonian government and the World Health Organization (WHO) agreed to further cooperation on e-services and digitalisation with the aim of developing digital vaccination cards, guidelines for ePrescription and eDispensing systems, and creating a European roadmap for digitalising national health services.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore important that Estonia continues to invest in digitalisation and its innovation. This is Estonia's soft power, which should not be allowed to slip away due to insufficient funding or political support.

The crisis has also been a stark reminder of the state of international politics. The absence of US global leadership and China's strong influence during the coronavirus crisis is a testament to changing vectors of power in the world. While the pandemic is, first and foremost, a health crisis, the geopolitical struggle and competition between the US and China accelerated further, moving from an abstract discussion to a practical problem.

For the Nordic-Baltic states, this is a source of concern. The countries in the region are strong supporters of transatlantic relations and US global leadership. Washington's increasing attention towards Asia and its weakened international role therefore indicates a change towards a world of greater power struggles and less international rules-driven global coexistence. For small and medium-sized countries, this is an unwanted and scary world.

<sup>12</sup> World Health Organization, "[Estonia and WHO to work together on digital health and innovation](#)," 7 October 2020.

China's increasingly active presence on the international stage puts the region in a difficult position. The policies of the NB countries vis-à-vis China are highly dependent on what position the US and EU take. With little first-hand experience of China, the country has not figured as an important part of the region's foreign and security policy debate. However, over the past two years, its importance has grown. Attitudes to China have shifted from curiosity and excitement towards caution and worry. With the coronavirus crisis, awareness of China's rising role and global influence has moved from foreign-policy circles to the public consciousness. How this will affect the making and pursuit of foreign policy in the region and Europe is yet to be seen.

Moreover, the crisis revealed the extent and consequences of the influence that China possesses in international organisations. For small and medium-sized states, international organisations are force multipliers, giving them a bigger platform and greater opportunity to influence global affairs. Under US global leadership, the values and actions of the global organisations have matched the values and interests driving the countries of the Nordic-Baltic region. However, in dealing with the crisis the WHO was heavily influenced by China. The WHO was cautious about criticising China's behaviour in minimising the spread of the virus and has gained almost no oversight of and access to its source in Wuhan. Information and communication have been patchy and confusing at times. The WHO represents an example of one country's interests overshadowing the global common good, almost to the detriment of an international organisation and its ability to function. This type of behaviour may occur more frequently in the future as the vectors of power shift within the global political community. The countries of the

Nordic-Baltic region will only lose from this shift, as international organisations are irreplaceable tools for executing their foreign policies.

## CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 crisis in the spring of 2020 was an unprecedented test of regional cooperation in the Nordic-Baltic region. Both diplomats and politicians were required to go to great lengths to ensure citizens could return home and to maintain friendly relations with the neighbouring countries.

*Close relations with neighbours and allies makes overcoming the crisis easier. However, the crisis also reminded us that, despite close relationships, support may still fail to come through*

Overall, the region did well and, despite disagreements, the spring of 2020 has not irreversibly damaged relations between the countries of the region. Nevertheless, the inward-looking and stubborn behaviour in the early stages of the crisis did leave imprints in the minds of the region's policymakers and politicians. The COVID-19 crisis motivates close neighbours to work more closely together as it showed that, in time of need, regional cooperation is an irreplaceable help and support. Close relations with neighbours and allies makes overcoming the crisis easier. However, the crisis also reminded us that, despite close relationships, support may still fail to come through. And, faced with a surprising shock, countries tend to turn inwards and neglect cooperation, to their own detriment. Moving into the future, the challenge is how to overcome that.

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