Chapter 12

Benevolent Assistance and Cognitive Colonisation: Nordic Involvement with the Baltic States since the 1990s

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Introduction

In recent years there has been increased political attention paid to the uses of public diplomacy by different countries for improving their economies, projecting identity, and achieving other policy goals. Within this framework this chapter seeks to explain Nordic involvement in/with the Baltic States in the past two decades. The communicative practice, interactions and building relations among these states provides a case that can be studied with respect to how states or associations of states understand cultures, attitudes and behaviour, build and manage relationships, and influence opinions and actions, which more or less intentionally advance their interests and values.1

The analysis in this chapter is anchored in the domain of international relations, with focus on the interdependencies created by the development aid and assistance that the Nordic states granted to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania when they broke free from the Soviet Union. The increasing tendency on the part of the Nordic states to act as agenda setters in the Baltic region is also discussed, which allows for viewing their actions as active international policy or, to use more contemporary terminology, as skilfully exercised public diplomacy. It proved all the more successful as the Baltic republics desired international recognition and longed to become fully-fledged parts of the West.

The analysis of how norms and agendas propagated by the Nordic countries have become accepted in the Baltic States is pursued here with a working hypothesis claiming that the assumed civilizational achievement of the allegedly superior Western standards, gained from the cooperation with the Nordic states, made the Baltic actors readily accept the infusion of local institutions with Nordic norms, values and practices. The process was rapid and mostly one-directional to the extent that instead of mutual learning, typical for partners that cooperate on an equal footing, the Nordic countries carried out an action that I describe as cognitive colonisation of the Baltic elites and publics.

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1 Gregory, “Public Diplomacy,” 274.
This meant that the political landscape and the decision makers’ agendas have been saturated with institutional structures, metaphors and other discursive short-cuts favourable to the Nordic countries – which represented Western Europe – to the extent that they became parts of the taken-for-granted cognitive schemas. Their institutional embeddedness was possible because a symbolic system, garnished with the English language functioning as a *lingua franca* of the Western civilisation, was transmitted along with Nordic assistance, which consisted of patterns of behaviour, signs and meanings, delivered together with modes of their interpretation.

### Analytical Tools, Theoretical Insights and Empirical Facts

Drawing on the available theories, the unbalanced relationship between the Nordic states and the Baltic republics in the 1990s could be interpreted as a lighter version of ‘small state imperialism’ (*småstatsimperialism*), similar to what had been practiced several decades earlier by Norway and Denmark with respect to Greenland, Iceland and the Faeroes. In its classical definition, small state imperialism involved attempts to maximise welfare, expand territory (or territorial influence) and establish a hegemonic power position. Taking into account the significant difference in social and economic capital between the Nordic countries and their Baltic counterparts, especially the third of these objectives could well be corroborated. With some caution also the first element could be substantiated as some authors point to the fact that in the Nordics’ cooperation and assistance strategy their self-interest was no less important than joint gains. Known as a policy of “adjacent internationalism” – meaning Nordic internationalism with a visible Baltic dimension – in practice it often meant providing assistance in a number of policy areas that have been crucial for the Baltic States but in which Nordic interests were just as important or motivated by the ‘neighbourhood interest’ of looking after one’s own backyard. Furthermore, the Nordic interests were guaranteed in the long-term perspective.

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2 For a study of how ideas permeate cognitive schemas in public policy see Campbell, “Ideas, Politics.”
3 The term was used as an analytical device in 1978 in Nilsson, *Grönlandsfrågan*.