

THE BALTIC SEA REGION

"A TRADITION OF MISTRUST" RETURNS

AN INTERVIEW WITH
**ANKE SCHMIDT-
FELZMANN &
ARŪNAS GRAZULIS**
BY **MARKUS DRAKE**

After the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and well into the 2000s, Green parties in Europe viewed military spending and national, territorial defence as outdated, called for an end to conscription, and believed that the time of insecurity had passed. Then, at some point between Russia's invasion of Georgia and its illegal annexation of the Crimean peninsula, the view on the security situation in Europe shifted. The countries in the Baltic Sea region, due to their position and culture, are profoundly impacted by these changes.

MARKUS DRAKE: In your views, what are the real sources of insecurity in the Baltic Sea region, and how will the region develop?

ANKE SCHMIDT-FELZMANN: The most serious threats in the Baltic Sea region stem from the strong ambitions of the Russian leadership to reassert Russia's role as a great power. Besides the threats of military incidents and Russian military aggression, the Russian leadership's disinterest in environmental protection and climate objectives could also have serious consequences for the region. Another challenge we face is that the trust and confidence many actors in the Baltic Sea region had for Russia was completely undermined by Russia's 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea and the military intrusion into Eastern Ukraine. There are also hard military threats emerging from Kaliningrad, Russia's sovereign territory between Poland and Lithuania. In addition, the Kremlin's repeated use of strong nuclear rhetoric against the Nordic countries gives reason for concern. The question is whether the Russian leadership can be trusted, and how relations can be developed while Crimea remains annexed and Eastern Ukraine under attack.

ARŪNAS GRAZULIS: In Lithuania, and I would say also in Estonia and Latvia, there is somewhat of a consensus between the major parties, which could be defined as a moderately hawkish approach towards foreign policy issues. And the Peasants and Greens Union is no exception. There is no dichotomy between the positions, though the parties on the political right are the most visibly hawkish. There is certainly a tradition of mistrust of Russia, based on the events of the 1990s, or 1940, or the late 1700s... On the other hand, since the late 1990s, the relations were twofold: there was a high policy agenda, with both sides making unfriendly statements, which mostly didn't interfere with trade and economic relations. The roots of current developments can be traced back to 2004 or so, with Putin's disappointment at the possibility of having close relations with the West without adhering to the Western values, which was later followed by the invasion of Georgia and the annexation of Crimea. Now Russia is placing several new military divisions on the borders of the Baltic states, with slow and smaller responses from the Baltic side. The apotheosis of such developments are joint Russian and Belarusian military exercises with the declared aim to cut through 120 km of Lithuanian territory to connect with Kaliningrad. However, I would not say that the Baltics are just sitting on a gunpowder keg: there is a bucket of water that is the NATO presence, with another potential water bucket provided by the countries to the west of the Baltic Sea.

ANKE SCHMIDT-FELZMANN: We should remember that after the end of the Cold War the Swedish Armed Forces took a 'strategic timeout'. The apparent stability in the Baltic Sea region that looked like a 'zone of peace' was seen as an opportunity to modernise and completely restructure Sweden's defence system, shifting the focus from territorial defence to out-of-area operations. While Sweden and the other Northern and Western European states saw relations with Russia in 2004 as better than ever, on the Eastern coast of the Baltic Sea there was a sense of foreboding.

ARŪNAS GRAZULIS: Yes, 2004 and 2005 were the turning points in Russia, with Baltic States joining NATO. Early on, Putin was rather neutral towards the Western bloc. Sure, it seemed that Russia regarded Baltic NATO membership as a bad choice, but the primary focus was on doing business. Later this changed to a geopolitical approach, like cutting off the oil pipeline to a Lithuanian oil plant, the construction of Nord Stream, as well as nuclear power plants in Belarus and Kaliningrad.

ANKE SCHMIDT-FELZMANN: To the Baltic States, the relationship with Russia has, for obvious reasons, always been central. Another important factor was that the Russian leadership decided to regain strategic control of the then already partly privatised Russian energy sector, and they did so with a clear ambition. The rapidly rising oil prices and increasing revenues made possible the reas-

sersion of Russia as a great power. Social, environmental, and health issues were given a back seat in favour of security and military interests and of "making Russia great again". Germany's and other western EU states' perception of Russia's development was completely at odds with that of Poland and the Baltic States. Already during Putin's first presidential term it was obvious where he, and Russia, was heading, long before the 2007 Bronze soldier incident in Tallinn and the cyber-attack on the Estonian state institutions.

Which was when ethnic Russians in Estonia rioted and massive Russian pressure was put on Estonia over the moving of a Red Army memorial statue...

ARŪNAS GRAZULIS: Yes, this conflict showed the lack of potential for a peaceful relationship, like we had before. In the years of de-sovietisation, a decade earlier, statues like this were removed across the Baltics, and were put in a park of Soviet monuments, which pro-Soviet-thinking people could consider disrespect, but it happened without negative reactions from Russia and local Russian communities back then. This is indicative of the balance of power, and now that balance has shifted. Russia uses this kind of hybrid war to show both soft and hard power.

ANKE SCHMIDT-FELZMANN: Most Western observers saw the deterioration come around 2009, but it really started in 2003 with Romano Prodi, then president of the European

Commission, declaring a "ring of friends", to which Russia protested that they were special and not part of that ring of "ordinary" neighbours, and so should have a separate relationship with the EU. Now a re-writing of history is taking place, with Russia complaining that they weren't consulted on Ukraine, although the Kremlin actually refused to be part of the "shared neighbourhood" and refused to engage. Now this is presented as 'evidence' of the EU's hostility to justify Russia's rejection of the EU's keen interest in cooperation.

ARŪNAS GRAZULIS: But there is practical cooperation with Russia in the Baltic Sea region. I can provide multiple examples of cross-border cooperation with Kaliningrad, with Russia behaving correctly, both in Kaliningrad and Moscow. Outside the securitised area, there is a good understanding of the environmental security issues and great interest in cooperation at the local and regional levels on the issues affecting daily life.

ANKE SCHMIDT-FELZMANN: But there remains a disconnect between local politics and power politics. Good cooperation locally among the countries in the Baltic Sea region never really translated into a real sense of community and cooperation between these countries.

How about the reaction to this disconnect, and the search for a military solution to the imbalance, with Sweden going for rearmament and a return to conscription?

ANKE SCHMIDT-FELZMANN: The perception of what Sweden does and the actual situation are different. Sweden spends only 1% of its GDP on defence, and although the capacity of the Swedish Armed Forces is no longer being dismantled, defence spending has been decreasing, rather than going up, over the last three years. The decision to reintroduce conscription in Sweden is expected to come into force 2017, but only a small number of those drafted are expected to complete their military service. The main reason for the reintroduction of conscription is a serious problem of personnel shortages in the Armed Forces.

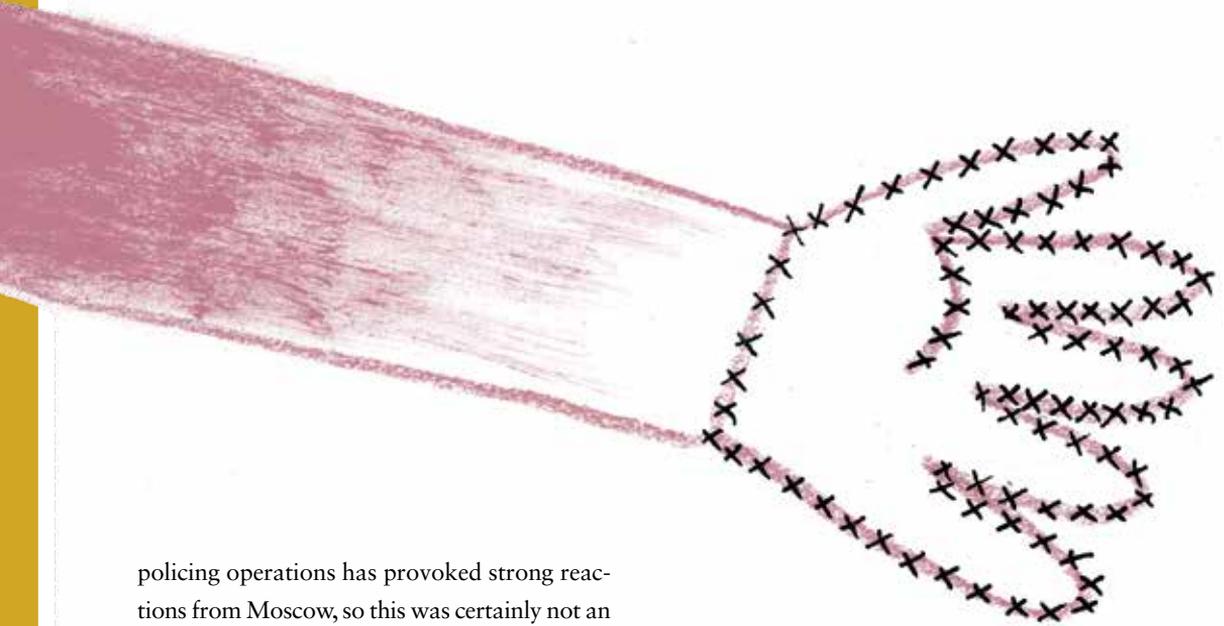
ARŪNAS GRAZULIS: I would like to defend the Swedish army's reduction of its potential during the 1990s and 2000s. In fact, they were quite smart: they just moved their excess equipment to the Baltic States, including anti-aircraft rockets! These countries received a lot of material from both Sweden and Germany at a good price or for free. Investing in your neighbour's security is good for your security! So Sweden and Germany were actually helping their own security by getting rid of their military capacity. Conscription was abolished in Lithuania in 2008 with the same assumption that the region was stable and

that we would be protected by NATO. When conscription was reintroduced in 2015, the numbers were small and growing slowly. The large focus is also on territorial defence forces, consisting of volunteers.

ANKE SCHMIDT-FELZMANN: In Sweden, the volunteer force *Hemvärnet* has also been revitalised since 2014. Many volunteers had served as conscripts or had even been in the regiments that were dismantled during the 2000s. My impression is that a lot of younger people in the Baltic States, those of generations born after the end of the Cold War are now happily joining the home guard. I am not sure there is the same level of enthusiasm in Sweden.

ARŪNAS GRAZULIS: Yes, throughout the Baltics this investment is strong, Lithuania recently set the target to increase defence spending to 2.5% of the GDP, surpassing the informal NATO standard of 2%, not as a political decision but as a consequence of the geopolitical change. Putting larger emphasis on their own capacities is a shift away from the recent paradigm that the best defence of the Baltic States is the first dead American soldier...

ANKE SCHMIDT-FELZMANN: Although that may be true, we should not forget that Canadian, British, and German soldiers are going to be stationed in Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, and that this is a particularly huge step for Berlin. Already the German participation in Baltic air



policing operations has provoked strong reactions from Moscow, so this was certainly not an easy step for Germany to become a framework nation for the NATO battalion in Lithuania.

ARŪNAS GRAZULIS: We're seeing a shift away from the Schröder-paradigm in Germany.

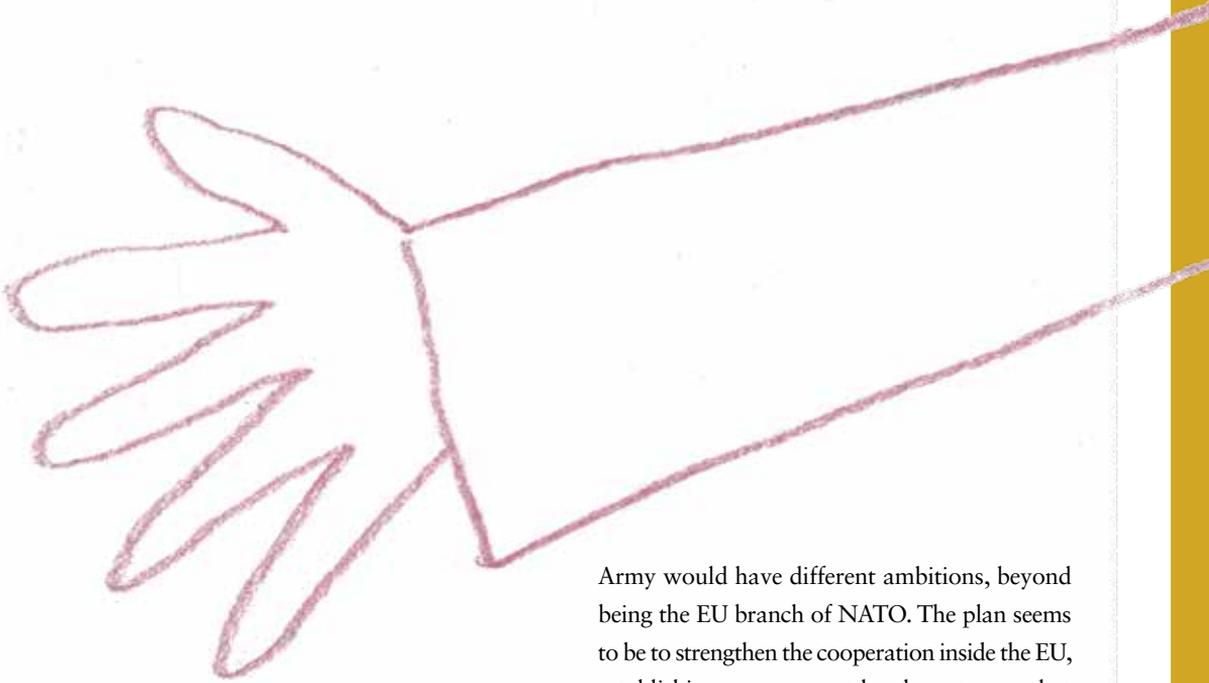
ANKE SCHMIDT-FELZMANN: Yes and no. There are still significant differences between Social Democrats and Christian Democrats in Germany, but there is a consensus that Russia can pose a threat in the Baltic Sea region, and that it is vital for Germany to put soldiers, not only money, where our mouth is. Dialogue continues, the door is open, but Germany is leaving no doubt in the Kremlin about whom the Bundeswehr (Germany army) is ready to defend militarily.

You said that "the best defence is the first dead American soldier". How do you think this holds up in the time of President Trump?

ARŪNAS GRAZULIS: Trump is a big question mark that will become clearer in the next couple of months. The first question should be

how serious he is about making deals with Putin. The Baltic States, of course, are cautious, and any statement of Trump's will be closely monitored. There is the assumption that any president will see limits set by U.S. national interests and the economy. This belief seems to be shared by Russian analysts, but they give a two-year time frame between the campaign speech and the reality settling in. Those two years might be a time crucial for the region.

ANKE SCHMIDT-FELZMANN: I don't share that optimism. Maybe the new U.S. president won't realise "how things work". We should not take normalisation for granted, given the character of Donald Trump. We have already seen that the countries in the Baltic Sea region have moved to seek reassurances from other countries. Germany is waking up to a new reality, and the new Swedish-Finnish defence cooperation agreement prepares for defence cooperation "beyond peace", which is quite significant.



So will these countries stand up for the idea of a European Common Security and Defence Policy, or even a European army? Are Finland and Sweden's efforts to fill gaps in each other's military strengths a way towards a common defence?

ANKE SCHMIDT-FELZMANN: Complementarity between militaries in Finland and Sweden should not be seen as a solution to the gaps in their capabilities. And the reason why an enhanced level of inter-operability is needed between Finland and Sweden is that their partners are already inter-operable through NATO. The proposed EU army has very little to do with the Baltic Sea region. The 'Juncker plan' rehashed in the French-German proposal at the Bratislava summit does not answer the immediate questions. Creating a European branch within NATO is totally legitimate, but what would be the added advantages of an additional structure within the EU framework that mimics NATO? The EU

Army would have different ambitions, beyond being the EU branch of NATO. The plan seems to be to strengthen the cooperation inside the EU, establishing a permanent headquarters so that there would not be a need to set up a new HQ for each EU mission. But this 'EU Army' plan does not offer any solutions for the Baltic Sea region.

ARŪNAS GRAZULIS: Correct, the Baltics are not interested in the idea of an EU defence force, as it is seen as undermining NATO in one way or another, as an attempt to get rid of the key security player: the US.

Let's move on to the Green core issues of energy security and climate change, how are they impacted by the current tensions with Russia?

ARŪNAS GRAZULIS: Remember that the revolution of shifting to small cars came as a reaction to the oil crisis in 1973, with Germany boosting its export of small VW Beetles! There can be positive effects. Lithuania now has a gas import terminal, so we no longer pay the highest gas prices in Europe, as was the case during the last half decade! The production of green energy has

also been on the rise for several years. It might be high time for Russia to be concerned about this, as they depend on energy exports.

ANKE SCHMIDT-FELZMANN: Sweden is still at the forefront, with a large share of renewables. It has been interesting to see, with the re-militarisation of the Baltic Sea region and the need to expand capabilities and develop old and new military bases, including on the island of Gotland, how the Green agenda is affecting traditional 'hard' military and security issues. The reintroduction of a military presence on Gotland requires new construction work, and there is resistance to this which seems to be motivated by the old peace agenda and to go beyond real environmental reasons. However, the new military architecture is taking on modern environmental and sustainability standards: new buildings and structures are planned to fit smoothly into the landscape, and plans for how to manage water use and waste from military exercises are being developed.

Another issue is the clash between new green energy infrastructure and the national military and security agendas. In south-east Sweden, a major offshore wind park was meant to supply the mainland with green energy. In December 2016, the Swedish government denied the construction permit despite protests from the local authorities at the subsequent disappearance of investments and employment. The decision was motivated by national security: their impact

assessments said the wind farm would have had a negative impact on the Swedish Navy and Airforce's ability to conduct exercises.

Finally, there's the planned construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines across the Baltic Sea. Legitimate environmental concerns for the Baltic Sea environment and the impact on nature reserves are hardly discussed, though the increase in fossil fuels that the pipeline will bring is frequently mentioned in the Swedish debate. The Swedish government also made clear that the pipeline poses a threat to national security. Issues of the environment, energy infrastructure and supply, and the sustainable use of land, water, and other resources can no longer be separated from hard, military security concerns in the Baltic Sea region.

How do you see the differences between the Greens in the Baltic Sea region? How different are their political visions on security and their programmes, and do you have any policy suggestions on security for Green parties?

ARŪNAS GRAZULIS: I would say the key difference between a West European Green and a Lithuanian and Latvian Green policy is that there is less path dependence with the latter. By this I mean that the Lithuanian and Latvian Peasants and Green Parties are less bound by the ideological environmental-centred agenda. They adapt to the current situation with much larger shifts in their party programmes and political priori-

ties, when necessary. Overall, due to our specific Baltic histories, the Lithuanian and Latvian Green foreign policy positions are rather to the right, with the rest of the Greens in Europe being far to the left of them.

ANKE SCHMIDT-FELZMANN: It is a recent development that hard, military security issues have become intermingled with Green issues and that we have to think of the impact of green policy on these issues and on national security. I found no responses to hard threats in the Swedish Green Party programme, but rather a call for “more cooperation, more dialogue, more understanding”. I remember when Joschka Fischer supported the Kosovo intervention as Foreign Minister in 1999, and what a shock it was when “all of a sudden the Green party went to war”. Now I see Green politicians like Robert Habeck, a Minister in the Schleswig-Holstein government, and German Green party leader Cem Özdemir, adopting a hard, principled stance on security issues in Syria and Ukraine. The Greens in Sweden have managed to avoid the difficult security and military issues. This has perhaps been made easier by the Swedish Social Democrats continuing with their policy of being “militarily non-aligned”, so Swedish Greens have not had to take a stance.



MARKUS DRAKE

used to work for the Catholic development movement, and is now a member of the Party Council of the Finnish Green Party.



DR. ANKE SCHMIDT-FELZMANN

is a researcher at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (Utrikespolitiska institutet, UI), whose work has focused on the EU-Russian relationship, security challenges in the Baltic Sea region, and energy security.



ARŪNAS GRAŽULIS

is assistant to Member of the European Parliament Bronis Ropė, of the Lithuanian Peasants and Greens Union.