

**CONNEXE 6 | 2020**

**Espace baltique : dynamiques identitaires et  
stratégies politiques en question(s)**

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## OPEN FORA: Interview of Marko Lehti and Heiko Pääbo



**Marko Lehti**  
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Senior research fellow, deputy director of the Tampere Peace Research Institute (TAPRI) as well as academic director of the MA programme in Peace, Mediation and Conflict Research (PEACE) since 2012. Lehti's current research focuses on peace mediation and dialogue, crises of the liberal order, and the idea of "Nordic peace." His earlier studies dealt with the Baltic Sea Area cooperation, regional identification and Baltic diplomacy. His latest works are *Contestations of Liberal Order. The West in Crisis?* (with Henna-Riikka Pennanen & Jukka Jouhki) (Palgrave 2020) and *The Era of Private Peacemakers. A New Dialogic Approach to Mediation* (Palgrave 2019). He has published several books focussing on the Baltic (Sea). More info on [Researchgate](#)



**Heiko Pääbo**  
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Lecturer in Politics of Baltic Sea Region Countries and programme director for Central and Eastern European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies of the University of Tartu. His current research field is related to memory and identity studies, focusing on the analysis of Estonian history textbooks. He is also a member of the Memory Studies Association. Earlier, he conducted research on the Baltic states foreign policy, Estonian-Russian and Finnish-Russian cross-border cooperation. His recent publications include 'How Russian soft power fails in Estonia: Or, Why the Russophone Minorities Remain Quiescent', *Journal of Baltic Security* (2015), and 'Constructing Historical Space: Estonia's Transition from the Russian Civilization to the Baltic Sea Region' *Journal of Baltic Studies* (2014).

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*Nicolas Escach and Katerina Kesa have conducted these Skype interviews on 11 October 2019 (11.00 am) and 21 October 2019 (10.00 am).*

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**How has research on the Baltic space evolved over the last thirty years? Can you perceive a different evolution depending on the universities/research groups/countries (in particular when comparing American, French, Nordic or Baltic research poles/centres)? Which issues have been left out of the research on Baltic space until today? Generally speaking, research on the Baltic space has sometimes had difficulties to arouse vocations. How do you explain that? Are the perceptions of specialists coming from countries boarding the Baltic Sea on the Baltic space totally different from that of other experts?**

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### **Heiko Pääbo**

Baltic space related studies have probably followed the evolution of society developments. At the beginning, the focus was very much on transition questions and their potential impact on neighbouring areas. During the 1990s, the question of security, in particular the security of the Baltic States, was one of the key concepts. It was a central issue in debates. At that time, not only the three Baltic States scholars but also many Nordic, German, American scholars were discussing about what would be the best way for the Baltic states to preserve their security being outside of NATO. Although the Baltic states were eager to get the NATO membership, in the academic circles of the 1990s, in particular, this perspective seemed to be “mission impossible.” Environmental cooperation was one of the starting points of the Baltic Sea region’s cooperation, as in the 1990s, a lot of research projects were related to environmental questions. Furthermore, another important field of research was the region building. For instance, the cross-border cooperation was a very central question considering that half of the region was in the EU and half was not. The question was: how could one involve the countries that were not in the EU? Finland in particular was giving a very efficient example of cross-border cooperation with Russia. I remember participating in several projects that compared Estonia and Finland. Finnish cooperation with Russia was more efficient than the Estonian one. Then came the Northern Dimension, a Finnish project. These were the questions set on the agenda in the 1990s. At the beginning of the 1990s, there was also the question of the Baltic Sea history. Researchers tried to understand the Baltic Sea region as a historical region. For a while after that, more contemporary issues became prevalent, probably together with the EU membership and the EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region. This is how Baltic Sea history also came to the EU agenda. And on and off, the question of the Baltic Sea region’s identity has been raised. In the 1990s, there was a question about the very strong “Nordic brand” or “Nordic identity” and how these fit in the Baltic Sea region, whether they were competing or complementary identities. When the Estonian Foreign Minister T.H. Ilves became president and came up with the idea of Estonia being a “post-Soviet Nordic country,” this raised a debate (rather in the late 1990) on whether Estonia is Nordic or not. In general, the most interested in this region-wide approach were the Nordic and Baltic scholars. It should be said that the Baltic scholars have learned a lot from their Nordic colleagues. For instance, when we started the memory network, we started as a Nordic-Baltic memory network. From the Baltics, only Estonia was involved. Latvians,

Lithuanians stayed aside. Then this network developed into a sort of European-wide network of memory studies. This cluster has also been very important to start to unify different memory scholars from Europe, and also globally.

I think that today some questions linked to our practical reality have again been raised. If earlier there were a lot of questions about the importance of Russia in the Baltic Sea region and how to better involve this country in the regional cooperation, there are no extremely different options for Russia anymore. There is also no more willingness to deal with Russia as a special case. I think that the Finnish scholars are still trying to raise the issue because Finland also tries to involve Russia more from a political point of view. Another topic that became very important, in particular for the Nordic scholars, and that really started to compete with the Baltic Sea region during the second decade of the 2000s, was the question of the Arctic. In fact, in the early 2000s with the enlargement of the EU and NATO to Poland and Baltic states, a lot of the security-related topics vanished. Relations with Russia were also relatively good at that time, I would say. There seemed to be some harmony and stability in the Baltic Sea region then. It is in this context that the Arctic started to take over the attention and compete with Baltic issues. But the EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region brought the region-building topic back to the agenda of scholars.

### **Marko Lehti**

My perspective in this regard is more historical. I haven't been following research focused on the Baltic Sea region actively in the past years. Lately, I have been concentrating more on peace studies and themes like peace mediation where the Baltic area is not a core area. We can say that the research on the Baltic area really started in the early 1990s. Some roots go back to the Cold War years or even to the interwar period with very little elements here and there. Baltic space studies were very much introduced in the early 1990s by the academics from the Nordic, German universities, and the United Kingdom. At that time, in the Baltic states, the focus was much less on the whole area of the Baltic Sea region and more on three Baltic states themselves. In this regard, the emergence of Baltic studies was very much connected with Baltic diplomacy. Focusing on the Baltic Sea area was, in particular, an idealistic post-Cold War trend believing in the merging of regions in an interconnected Europe, so that all these dividing lines would daze away. This kind of approach resonated particularly in political science orientated studies, but also in history studies. The interesting question here is: what happened during the last decade and a half once this optimistic period was over? How has the changing political situation influenced research interests? Maybe I am wrong, but it seems that many researchers have lost interest in studying the Baltic Sea area. Regional approaches are not trendy anymore. Study programmes like that of Baltic Sea Region Studies at Turku University closed down when the Nordics lost interest in the Baltic Sea area. There are nowadays more studies beyond the area: in Germany, France, even in Poland and, of course, in the Baltic states. We can say that the interest to study the Baltic Sea area and the Baltic space in the 1990s was very much connected with Baltic societal economic trends. I think that the current trends across Europe are moving towards more nationalistic ways of thinking. This kind of transnational ideas, even if they are in a certain way still very popular within the academic community, are not so much within society anymore. This transnational emphasis is connected with rather different kinds of topics on the Baltic Sea area. Yet in these times, we need more transnational perspectives than ever and I call for the revival of historical and social science studies applied to the Baltic states.

In retrospect, how do you perceive the period between the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s when it comes to cooperation between the countries of the Baltic Sea? Has this period been as dynamic and cooperative as it is said to be? Has this period really contributed to give rise to a common identity? Certain authors (i.e. Anaïs Marin) evoke that cooperation during this period had evacuated the questions of “hard security” while concentrating more on “soft security” concerning, for example, environmental or cultural issues. Do you think that these years were the founders of the relations between coastal countries? What other periods have played a decisive role for this region?

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### Heiko Pääbo

I think that North German scholars in particular brought the issue of the entire Baltic Sea region in the late 1980s. It was then taken over by the Nordic scholars and later by the Baltic ones. In the political field, the same developments happened. The modern institutional framework was mainly established in the 1990s. Today, we say that the Baltic Sea region is over institutionalised with more networks and institutions than necessary, we say that they are even disturbing each other because dealing with the same topics. Estonia in particular has recently emphasised this efficiency argument considering that it is the smallest country in the region and lacks human resources to really participate in the cooperation. But these institutions have been established at different historical momentums and it would be very difficult to close them down today. It would need consensus. I think that the late 1980s were certainly a historical momentum, and probably the entire 1990s too. After that, things started to change with the EU starting to slowly take over these frameworks. And now with the EU’s regional macro-region, the cooperation is moving back. We hope this is a new momentum.

The late 1980s–1990s definitely gave ground [for common identity] because the topic “do we have a common identity in the Baltic Sea region?” is still in the air. This is also one of the topics of the EU strategy: we should enhance regional identity, the strength of connections... The way I see this region today is with Nordic and Baltic states being its core. They are all small states and have a relatively similar understanding of international relations and of the importance of cooperation. Germany, Poland and Russia seem to be members who stand outside, coming in and going out depending on their interest. Germany has delegated the regional cooperation to the state level [Bundesländer]. The *Bundesländer* which are on the Baltic Sea coast are more involved in this cooperation and Berlin (the central government) is not creating any obstacles for them. Whereas in Russia, Moscow is centralising very heavily, and this makes the Russian cooperation in the Baltic Sea region very difficult. As for Poland, when it had presidency of the Council of Baltic Sea States, it was much more actively involved, with a government which was less heavily nationalist than the current one. At that time, Poland started to realise that the Baltic Sea region cooperation is more than only an environmental one because that was, I think, the main obstacle for this country to get involved. Poland had its own agenda on environmental questions and still does. Currently, Poland is again focusing more on the Visegrad group than the Baltic Sea region. Therefore, talking about common identity... I would say that without the late 1980–1990 developments it would have been impossible to establish a common Baltic Sea identity, but I would not say that this identity is ready and still there. A common identity requires internal and external acceptance. When I teach the Baltic Sea region issues, even for



German students, it is a surprise to realise that the Germans are part of the Baltic Sea Region. It shows that they do not think in these categories. The Cold War stereotypes are still too strong in their heads. There is still a very strong “Nordic brand,” which is kind of shiny and prosperous. And then there is a “Baltic brand” that was also there during the Cold War, whereas until then it was difficult to say that the Baltic states were so similar. Estonia and Latvia were, because of a common history, but Lithuania was quite a different case. To some extent, Finland used to be even more similar to Estonia and Latvia than Lithuania was. These Nordic and Baltic brands are still very active today, for those who are outside but also for those who are inside. There definitely also are pragmatic reasons to brand our region as *one*, considering all these global trends and markets that perceive the Baltic Sea region as *one* socio-economic space.

### Marko Lehti

Indeed, at least in my understanding, the late 1980s and especially the early 1990s was a very active, future-oriented, optimistic period, but actually there was also a great division in society at the time because it meant many changes. The end of the Cold War’s polarity created a kind of uncertainty, unpredictability about how things were. At that moment, in the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, there was a big division between, first of all, those who saw the changes as a kind of threat that “you do not control the future anymore.” They tried to keep on old understandings and practices. This was actually very clear in Finland. And then there was –perhaps a smaller group but a loud group– that actively saw these changes as a kind of opportunity to shape the future. And I think that this really was a remarkable period because the actors of that time launched new ideas, all these kinds of slogans from “New Hansa” and onwards, creating this image of the Baltic Sea area, but also using these historical narratives, creating the first parliamentary meetings and so on. So, in that sense, all this was very groundbreaking with very brave people –politicians and NGOs– working on that project. Academics come a bit later but quite soon as well, especially International Relations’ scholars, in particular from Copenhagen. I think this built a good basis for diplomacy in the 1990s. All this was generated by a positive energy which of course connected with other processes, more linked with the European Union rhetoric and so on. This was a beginning for all of that.

What is the importance of this period? Did it create a common Baltic identity? Well, I would doubt that there ever was a real “Baltic Area” or “Baltic Sea identity” but certainly an identity of the region, of the Baltic Area was created in the early 1990s. Then new narratives were launched –which are perhaps still there– and these narratives revived, recreated and interconnected the area sharing the same past and belonging. The Cold War era was depicted as a kind of “false history” cutting natural Baltic connections. But at the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century this idealistic era was over and the return of classical power diplomacy started in 2004, or at least in 2008 with the Russo-Georgian war, which changed everything. It created new dividing lines and brought back old ones, and rising nationalism superseded more idealist transnationalism. Yes, of course, if you look back to the 1990s, the understanding of security and threats had changed in society. The classical militarised threats never completely disappeared around the Baltic Sea –in the Baltic states they remained rather fundamental– but in Finland and Sweden for example they became secondary. Greater attention was paid to security as an economic and societal issue. The Baltic Sea was seen as a region enhancing diplomacy and as an economic area supporting chaos. And this emphasis was still there in the early 2000s. In many ways, the return of power diplomacy started during the Russo-Georgian war which brought back the question of “hard

security,” i.e. the militarised security issue, in the Baltic Sea area. The result was the deepening of the NATO-Russian division in the area. The change from 2000 to 2010 was drastic. After the Russo-Georgian war, militarised polarisation returned to the Baltic area, especially in the sense that NATO and Russia started to organise their military exercises, preparing against an attack on the other side. In the 1990s, we did forget altogether the threat of traditional war. But the new more aggressive great power politics of Russia since 2008 changed things. There was also strong pressure from Poland and the Baltic states to change the rhetoric of the EU and NATO. Meanwhile, Russia did its best by reacting and creating this polarisation. This change of ideas is visible also in Sweden: within Sweden, the security philosophy was based on strong trust that there would be no wars, no militarised threat against Sweden in the future... This changed especially when the Russian military rehearsals provoked Sweden. It brought back a kind of a “traditional security” in the Baltic sea. We have been living with this new divided Baltic area for some years now. Unfortunately, there is no mechanism nor instrument to talk about “hard security” in the Baltic Sea area, neither any trustful confidence-building mechanism. The latter was not seen to be important in the 1990s and early 2000s. Diplomacy at that time did not go in this direction at all. The question is: would it be too late for a Baltic area-based dialogue which would somehow soften the militarised tensions in the area? These tensions are certainly not good for the future.

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**Where is the centre of the Baltic space today according to you in terms of impulsion projects but also considering territorial proximity?**

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### **Heiko Pääbo**

This can be answered in very different ways. It depends on where to look. The Swedes would probably believe that Sweden is the centre. Sweden is also the biggest of the small countries. It has been the locomotive of the EU strategy and has tried to be the enthusiast promoter of this cooperation. At the same time, Sweden is also considered by its neighbours as trying to have too much influence in the region. Denmark probably is not so eager to see Sweden as the centre of the region. This question is also linked to closer integration of some countries, which is the case between Estonia and Finland. A lot of Estonians are working and living in Finland. Now Finns are also moving to Estonia. There have been debates about unifying two capitals into one space, called “Hellink.” A project is to be launched soon about mutualisation of public transportation cards in Helsinki, Tallinn and Tartu. This all shows closer integration. I would say that geographically speaking South Finland, Northern-Western Estonia and Sweden, are the most central countries. This is at least how I see things. Probably if you ask colleagues from Denmark, Poland or Lithuania, they may say that the South Baltic Sea countries are the centre. There are also very active NGOs and regional cooperation organisations in Northern Poland who really try to promote this South Baltic dimension. But again, the recent Polish government somehow has quite a lot of obstacles for them. That makes this cooperation more difficult for grassroots organisations.

### **Marko Lehti**

Well, can we define these things? Yes, we can think in terms of the “most active actors,” the “generators” of all this area. In the beginning, the centre of creative activity was in the Nordics and Northern Germany. But maybe there is no centre at all, it is all fragmented, and that is how

it should be as the Baltic Area always appears in plural. There is and should be one correct and uniform understanding of what the Baltic area is. The Baltic connection can be narrower in its geographic focus; there are intense transnational regions. For example, in the Öresund region or between Helsinki-Tallinn. But the problem is that there is no creative activity to revive the Baltic area anywhere. Of course, certain institutions and associations carry on the works still. But there is not so much renewal or innovative thinking as to how the Baltic region should look like in the future. Interestingly, COVID-19 restrictions in summer 2020 had some positive impulse for these areas because once long-distant travel was abandoned, nearby areas appeared as a new safe zone, a travel bubble from which Sweden and Russia were excluded.

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**Do you believe in the existence of a unified region in the Baltic Sea? For what/whom has this expression been most useful? For what/whom is this expression useful today?**

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### **Heiko Pääbo**

I don't know how unified the region is today. There are a lot of common topics: environmental concerns, certainly the security perceptions are similar even if we display them out differently. There are also a lot of different projects which try to unify the Baltic states and Finland in a common European energy network. Having many common issues on the agenda helps to unify the region as a whole and to create the understanding that we are united. This feeling is even more useful for small states, the Nordic and Baltic States... In global terms, we are all small states. For Estonia, Sweden is a big country but in global terms even Sweden is a small state... And this helps to increase visibility, it makes the region attractive for global investments, and when the countries have the feeling of being a united region, it also helps to promote each other in global competitions. For example, Estonians learned from the Swedish experience to campaign for the non-permanent membership to the UN Security Council. All these things are important, in particular for small states. There is also the idea of the "comparative advantage," meaning that we should specialise in countries having in mind that one country is good in one field and the other in another one. So, to deal carefully with scarce resources: small countries with a little population can't provide expertise in all fields but if we share this expertise, then we all benefit from it. So, we can say that small countries are looking for this unified region more. They are the engines for that.

### **Marko Lehti**

This has been kind of a rhetoric. I do not believe in any unified region or in any uniformed thinking in any regard. Certain narratives were at some point marketing how great, intense and important the Baltic Sea area is. A long time ago, this rhetoric collected all possible economic metrics to show how many people were living in the area, what the potential trade was and so on...I think that the richness of the area is its diversity but different communities and nations can find themselves, or imagine themselves within this diverse world of dynamic connections and interactions. This kind of Baltic area means different things to different people living in different areas, different locations, representing different ethnic, age, religious and social groups. The area cannot have a uniform understanding as actors approach the Baltic from different perspectives. Working towards a common element which would combine all these ideas and connections around the Baltic Sea area might be misleading. So, the Baltic is more



or less a mycelium. This kind of perspective emphasises the complexity of different kinds of connections and pinpoints and shows that everything is not interconnected at all. There could also be controversial trends –exclusive national trends, transnationalism and cosmopolitanism all coexisting for example at the same time, in the early 20th century Baltic metropolis like Riga. Yes, and in the 1990s and 2000s, one or a couple of very uniformist narratives dominated, that did not look for diversity. Variations of processes were needed for the region. When these uniformist narratives lost their credibility. We should focus on the complexity of connections: we need new narratives and narrators that appreciate this kind of proportional, everyday focused and dynamic narratives. Perhaps we should shift focus from grand narratives to the micro level.

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**We have witnessed since the fall of the Iron Curtain the multiplication of local, regional and national actors. What do you think, what have they brought most in terms of concrete and tangible impacts? In which field have they been most efficient with respect to the regionalisation of the Baltic space? Which project has contributed the most to the *rapprochement* between the Baltic Sea region countries? Which project (or field of cooperation) could play an important role in the future of this region?**

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### Heiko Pääbo

One of the key central issues has been the environmental question. The Baltic Sea is geographically the most (or one of the most) vulnerable seas in the World. It is difficult to say that there have been lots of results or successful solutions to show. At the same time, there have been attempts to improve these conditions, for example in order to clean the sea from the wartime mines and bombs where the countries have been actively cooperating, cleaning the lake Peipsi to avoid its waste flowing through the rivers to the Baltic Sea. In that sense, there has been a lot of cooperation in the environmental field involving all the countries around the Baltic Sea, that makes the environment and sustainable development one of the central topics. And I already mentioned, in this field, Poland is a particular case. Russia probably another one. For these countries, economic development has always been more important than environmental preservation. This has created some complications to cooperation. A successful area of cooperation has been the Baltic states' post-Soviet transformation. If you look today at the post-Soviet or post-Communist space, the three Baltic states are clearly the most successful stories with some good and bad sides of course, but in comparison (except Slovenia that is another positive case), many others have experienced serious setbacks. I think it is also thanks to the Baltic Sea region cooperation that the Nordic countries were the first ones to offer their funds to the Baltic states. This assistance was very important for these countries. In this logic, the Baltic states were the first truly realistic partners for Nordic countries whereas Poland is too big. Historically speaking as well, Poland has always looked more on the continent and much less on the sea. Poland does not define itself as a sea country. As Poland was rather looking to the west, Germany took a similar position towards Poland. Nevertheless, even though Germany assisted them and the cross-border as well as the grass-roots level cooperation was good, the relations between both countries were rather complicated at central level. Moreover, there was quite a strong anti-German feeling in the Polish society. As for Russia, the Nordic Council of Ministers also made quite a lot of investment in the North-West of Russia. There were many different projects. I have participated myself in several kinds of projects, but Russia is too big.

Even if we managed to make some regional change, it did not affect the central government. These investments did not find sufficient grounds as there was no will on behalf of the political elite to change.

### Marko Lehti

This question is in a way related to my previous answer when I said that all kinds of actors and generators are as important. Of course, in the traditional field we can say that there are certain political actors that have been very important and visible (especially in the 1990s). But at the same time, in this regionalisation, even all kinds of society-based actors and academic staff have been as important, or actually more important. The early Baltic Sea Area connections were a prime example of broad NGO activity. These activities certainly have a long-term impact but building Baltic networks and organising Baltic meetings two decades back was a very conscious region-building approach, whereas nowadays the adjective “Baltic” is taken as a natural region without much thinking over the phenomena. As long as there are people, associations, NGOs or private companies who keep the Baltic area as a sort of natural space for them to act, work and cooperate, there is a Baltic region. An important field of cooperation has been the academic one. There were many initiatives in late 1990s–2000s in this field. People launched workshops, meetings, conferences, study programmes... Such networking and meetings, –even if they did not produce more than some *communiqués*–, were important because they created connections, friendships and ties. I have a feeling that this produced intense connections and lifelong friendships. But many Baltic programmes have been closed (like the one in Turku). There are fewer Baltic area based academic meetings and no new generation of “Baltic” scholars.

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**The Baltic Sea region is currently experiencing a ceaseless geopolitical crisis (sometimes referred to as a “hybrid war”) that seems to be prior to the invasion of Crimea by Russia in 2014. What do you think, when did this conflict really start? What could be the major risks concerning the current geopolitical situation in the Baltic Sea?**

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### Heiko Pääbo

Being Estonian I would say that it already started in 2007 with the so-called “Bronze Soldier.” It was very similar to what occurred in the Georgian and Ukrainian-Crimean cases. Very similar patterns started or were applied there. But I think that the biggest changes started during Putin’s second term, from 2004 and beyond. Initially he was trying to subjugate the country, to set a strong control over Russian regions, to finish the Second Chechen war, to make administrative changes, and suffocate Russian federal subjects under the Kremlin rule... After that, Russia was also benefitting from oil money making its international position stronger and stronger. Russia started to set stronger borders of what was its backyard and what was the Western backyard. I believe that Russia probably does not see the Baltic states as its backyard anymore such as are Ukraine or Georgia for the Kremlin decision-makers. But had Russia the possibility to undermine the Baltic states or any other Western country, it would not let this possibility unused. If something happens and it can get involved, then Russia does. The main idea is to undermine this kind of unity of the West, and maybe also to create internal tensions in societies to weaken the West.

## **Marko Lehti**

These are the aspects that interest me, but also worry me the most in the Baltic Sea region. We need to think about how we can create mechanisms that could influence rising tensions in the area. First, we should ask ourselves: was this change really unexpected? Twenty to fifteen years back we couldn't foresee this. The situation was so optimistic that the "traditional thinking" was gone at least here. We believed that regionalisation processes supported peaceful coexistence, that there would be a security community around the Baltic Sea area, that everyone had trust, and that all complex conflicts could be solved in a peaceful manner. This is not really the case anymore. The "traditional security" situation seems to be back and does not concern only Baltic States or Poland, but also Finland and even Sweden. I think the traditionally geostrategic discourse of Finnish security with Russia is back. It is also back in Sweden and Germany. All this is not much discussed in research, in the sense that debates are too much on just trying to describe things, but not on thinking about alternatives. These tensions in the area are still an unreal threat for any kind of conflict or militarised intervention. When there are so many secret practices and tests, things could also happen. Testing others military reactions could also be misinterpreted. But it is a "great" obstacle for any kind of planning of a future cooperation in the Baltic Sea area in this regard, especially with the integration of Russia in the area. Russia has really excluded itself from the area.

It is important to recall that twenty years ago there were lots of discussions on how the Kaliningrad area could be a pilot that would be partly integrated in the European Union and Russia. Now this topic would seem completely absurd. Russia is so militarised, and we are back in a traditional sovereignty thinking. But still, people want to cooperate, to meet each other. So, it is important to keep the civil society cooperation with Saint-Petersburg and the Kaliningrad area, with other nearby Russian areas and the rest of the Baltic Sea area. This would be part of a confidence-building mechanism. It is something that would matter now. The problem is that the situation has been described by the militaries or ministries in a very traditional way. But we need alternative narratives beyond the exclusive nationalistic ones which emphasise, think and depict neighbours as threats. Current security narratives focus again on a militarised invasion of Russia as a possible scenario, but I think this is oversimplifying the issue. The world has changed and even if power politics have returned, threats are different as well as forms of aggression. I do not think that the Crimea issue could be a problem in the Baltic Sea area. It is very unique. A bit more realistic would be a kind of Eastern-Ukrainian case which could be taken a bit more seriously because there have been efforts to influence the local Russian population and their thinking by using social media and all kinds of hybrid means. Maybe it is not active, but it is obvious that the spread of misinformation and the generation of distrust towards national authorities is part of Russia's new smart hybrid strategies. Despite investing on hybrid security, I think it is even more important for the Baltic states that they really manage to become multicultural and multi-ethnic societies, engaging the Russian population into their societies and strengthening social trust. This would be the best tool against hybrid policies.

**Environment is a cause for concern. The Baltic Sea could sooner or later become a dead sea, among others, because of the non-renewal of water and buried chemical waste. Do you think we can be optimistic in this field?**

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### **Heiko Pääbo**

I think it is a major risk for the Baltic Sea region because this eutrophication is definitely a very important issue. The expanding eutrophication leads to a kind of dead sea as you said. I think it is still possible to make change happen. The countries, which are at the moment the most affected by the eutrophication –like Sweden and Finland– are the most active in dealing with this topic. But the problem is that the countries which are causing the eutrophication –Poland and Russia– are the least cooperative in this field. This is the dilemma. Polish farmers are one of the biggest contributors of this increasing eutrophication. To convince the Polish government, –which actually recruits most of the votes, particularly from the areas where the farming is the main income–, is difficult... I think there is a slow improvement for other environmental issues like buried chemical waste. If this were the main issue, I believe that it would be doable. The objective is rather to get all the countries on board to deal with these topics. And now unfortunately the Populists have gained support from the societies of the Baltic Sea region and beyond. It makes the environmental preservation a difficult topic to discuss and it is hard to reach a consensus. For example, in Finland, the Finnish Populists, the True Finns, opposed the green agenda in the last elections. It was copied also by EKRE in Estonia. Thus, there are a lot of concerns at the moment in this field.

### **Marko Lehti**

That is a good question. I hate to talk about traditional militarised security and indeed we should focus more on environmental issues. In a long-term perspective, they matter more. Climate change should be the main focus for everyone in the area. In the Arctic you can see these changes more clearly, but the Baltic Sea area is very vulnerable because it is so small, with so little water. Because of climate change, it will probably not receive any more water from the Danish channels. The consequences of climate change are already here and visible but we often miss them. This is really influencing the area. How much do we pay attention to it? The Baltic Sea area cooperation started from the environment and pollution, already during the Cold War times... On a smaller scale, the issue is still there. In Finland for example, we discuss and worry about Baltic Sea pollution, but it is a very national-centric discussion. In the Finnish perspective, the focus is on the Saint-Petersburg area. The question is more on how much they polluted, and less on how we could work together. We would need some initiatives, ideas that would generate discussions about climate change in the Baltic Sea region. I wonder why the environmental issue is not under the spotlight or does not generate a Baltic-wide solidarity campaign to save our sea. In the end, our wellbeing depends on the fate of the Baltic Sea.

**What in your opinion is the situation of the Baltic space today? Is the cooperation challenged or threatened? Is the declared, supposed or real Baltic identity split? Is it necessary to restart/boost a new cycle of cooperation?**

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**Heiko Pääbo**

I don't think it is necessary to reboot... To boost maybe yes, but to restart maybe not. I think a certain new beginning came with the EU strategy, with the macro-regional strategy for the Baltic Sea region. That was definitely what boosted the region. Also, different researches show that the implementation of the strategy has boosted cooperation which somehow became an obsolete topic after most of the Baltic Sea region countries became EU members in 2004. In this framework, the cooperation can stay as it is... The earlier mentioned political threats, if certain countries deny that we have a common agenda such as environmental concerns, climate concerns... Our own Estonian Populists say that "oh, the climate change does not affect Estonians, we get just warmer weather, that is nice." Then yes, this undermines cooperation. I think these kinds of Populists are probably a threat. But I will not say that this is at the moment a predominant threat because even the populists do not deny that they should cooperate. Poland is quite a different case compared to small countries: their populists do not deny cooperation and do not see each other as possible opponents or sources of threat. Another thing is Russia. Russia has always been a security threat since the post-Cold War period. Initially, there were high hopes that Russia was changing. When it became clear that Russia was not changing, things went worse and worse. It therefore definitely boosted countries to cooperate more. But at the same time, what motivates countries to cooperate even more is when they have a common agenda...

**Marko Lehti**

As I said earlier there never really cannot and should not be a uniformed Baltic identity and no one is at the moment even declaring one. The richness of this area is in the diversity of connections which were created. For many, various kinds of Baltic connections still seem to be natural and the right way of doing things is continuing. All that was created in early decades has not been destroyed. It is perhaps continuing because there are not so many strong voices saying how the Baltic area should be like or what should be the most important of its aspects... So there is no uniformed Baltic identity, but the Baltic area is a kind of platform, a complex of connections. This is how the Baltic area has existed for centuries.

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**The "New Hansa" was a tremendous vector of unification during the 1980–1990 decade. Do you perceive/imagine any other narrative that could mobilise the actors of the Baltic Sea region today?**

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**Heiko Pääbo**

I think the "New Hansa" is quite a good narrative. It helps to unify countries, to strengthen transnational cooperation and so on... Even though it has strong German connotations. In Estonia and Latvia, we also had "Hansa" towns and so on... In this regard, today the German dimension is not perceived as something very negative by Estonians and Latvians as it used to be until the 1990s. I know that in Norway, for example, the term "Hansa" was kind of problematic,



meaning that the “Hansa” merchants were competing the Norwegian population out, and so on. As much as I am aware, they managed somehow to achieve a certain compromising view on this issue... If the Swedish Empire is seen positively by the Estonians and Latvians, functioning as a unifying symbol, then it definitely does not work for the Danes. Finns are also rather cautious about the qualification of the Swedish Empire, not to mention the Poles. They don't think that this could really help... Another possibility is to leave these kinds of historical symbols out and focus on the symbols of activities or topics, for example “sea nations”... That could be an alternative narrative underscoring cultural similarities and so on. Another option is that we emphasise that we have similarities but also differences and this is precisely what creates our unity. This is also defended on the European level...our strength is the differences that unite us. I think “Hansa” has been quite successful despite its German origin because it is quite an international or multinational phenomenon.

### **Marko Lehti**

This is a difficult question... To introduce such a powerful image we should know: what do we need the Baltic Sea area for? Within this globalised world, perhaps it is still important to enhance smaller areas and transnational ties. From the environmental point of view, it is important. Who else could take care of the sea if not us? This is not only the question of the sea as such because the sea is what connects the area around. So, it is a big issue. We need more cooperation in this field. We would like to have more cooperation as well in confidence-building. In this regard, I am not optimistic that we could easily have a building mechanism at state level. But we could have more cooperation, dialogue and interaction at the civil society level. I don't think we need any powerful and politically loaded narrative other than the “New Hansa”: this kind of narrative belonged to the 1990s. What we would need is a bunch of transnational narratives contesting nation-centric ones, and stressing how diverse our part of the world has always been. Understanding national homogeneity is more an exception than normality. I would not go back to an area based on strong narratives of the Baltic Sea region. Perhaps everyone could define its own Baltic area. There is a need for an option to escape from narrow nationalistic narratives: it is to connect your own past with a much wider context. This is easy to do and has to have justified connexions. These narratives should not be grandiose but focus on everyday life, on all kinds of societies and individuals, giving attention also to marginal and forgotten people.

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### **How has your own research evolved today from the Baltic Sea region?**

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### **Heiko Pääbo**

I have started to deal with cross-border issues and have participated in several research projects, looking at the Estonian border and moving to some comparative cases with Finland and Estonia. That can be a milestone. For a while, I focused more on the Baltic states and their foreign policy in the early 2000. I analysed questions of dependency, especially the dependency of Baltic states vis-à-vis Russia. Then I moved to memory studies, the Nordic-Baltic memory network. This is where I have stayed now, for more than ten years.

## Marko Lehti

I am currently working mostly on peace mediation, peace processes, and dialogue on civil society. At the moment, I have a project on South Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia, Ossetia, Armenia, Azerbaijan with a main interest for Nagorno-Karabakh. This is all connected with the regional idea. I return from time to time to the Baltic Sea area as an encouraging example. The Baltic example emphasised how regional narratives can tear down deep-rooted tensions, and unfortunately how easily they can be recreated. The Southern Caucasus shares the same Soviet legacy as the Baltic states. Yet, the situation there is much worse. We (Europeans) have been here for thirty years and not much has changed at state level. I think there is not much hope to see real solutions for various reasons. You have there those *de facto* states, the unrecognised territories and it is very difficult to tackle them. So, they have to think about solutions at the civil society level. We have to think about how we can get small transformations. As a part of my research project, we were testing cross-regional dialogue, bringing people together, civil society actors from these conflict areas to discuss common ideas and the future. In this region, there are also some common ideas from a historical perspective. These transnational narratives are probably needed in the Caucasus also because it is a more mixed and multi-ethnic area than the Baltic region. I am currently also working on the Nordic peace idea, about what the idea of Nordic peace would mean.

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