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NORDIC COUNTRIES AND RUSSIA AFTER 2014

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This brief text addresses the question of how Russia's recent actions in Ukraine – and elsewhere – have influenced debates and policies in the Nordic countries. The ambition here is to shed light on how these questions are addressed in Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland, the countries that for various reasons have had to redefine their policies towards Russia in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis in 2014.

This brief study is divided into two sections. In the first section we examine structural factors that have been influencing the Nordic countries policies towards Russia, while in the second section we look at specific national concerns and responses to what is widely interpreted as an emerging Russian security challenge.

Structural Factors, or Common Challenges

Relations with Russia and perceptions of Russia as a partner or a source of potential security threat had been important elements shaping foreign, defence and security policies of the Nordic countries even before the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine in 2014. The most important structural factors shaping these relations were the disparity of demographic, economic and military potentials, history of bilateral relations with Russia and

the collapse of the Soviet system that created high level of strategic unpredictability. The fact that Russia had not embarked full-heartedly on the democratization of its political system and the country's economic decline were other important elements of the strategic picture shaping the Nordic attitudes towards Russia during the 1990s. The ascent to power of Vladimir Putin, Russia's apparent economic and military revival and Russia's greater assertiveness on the international stage have also contributed to modifying the Nordic approaches to Russia.

It was, however the Ukrainian crisis that has dealt the heaviest blow to the hopes of Russia's Nordic neighbours that Russia was both willing and able to join the Western security community, i.e. a group of countries that rule out the use of military power as an instrument of solution of interstate problems. The Nordic countries decided to respond to this rising Russian challenge by adopting several measures and addressing specific national concerns.

National Factors and Responses

Although all Nordic countries share the view that a more assertive and aggressive Russia poses a strategic

challenge, their national policies towards Russia are informed by a variety of country-specific considerations.

Having a land border with Russia that has over the past decade improved its military capabilities and has shown willingness to use military instruments in pursuing its strategic goals is a key factor shaping both the Finnish and the Norwegian policy towards Russia. What makes this border question even more challenging is the fact that Russia has more than 60 percent of its sea based nuclear power arsenal deployed only slightly more than 100 km from the Norwegian and less than 200 km from the Finnish border. The Northern Fleet is the key Russian strategic asset and the Russian need to defend what is in the Russian parlance referred to as the Northern Bastion can turn this neighbourhood into an area of direct military confrontation in case of a major crisis breaking out somewhere else. The possibility of Russia using military instruments to protect its strategic assets in the High North could have dire consequences not only for Russia's direct neighbours – Norway and Finland – but also for the two other Nordic countries, Denmark and Sweden, that would be most probably drawn in this conflict.

The ability of the Nordic countries to address the Russian challenge depends also on their institutional affiliations. Sweden and Finland are members of the European Union and have recently formalised their closer cooperation with NATO, putting also, partly in response to the Ukrainian crisis, the question of their NATO membership on the national and international agendas. Denmark is the member of the European Union and NATO, while Norway is a full-fledged member of NATO and has a specific form of affiliation with the EU as a member of the European Economic Area, participating also in defence and security related European cooperation.

All EU – or EU affiliated – Nordic countries have supported the idea of introducing restrictive measures against Russia in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine. All of them were also 'victims' of the Russian

counter-sanctions that have had a negative impact on their trade with Russia, with Norway suffering the most due to the loss of access to the Russian market for the Norwegian fish. The impact of sanctions and counter-sanctions on economic cooperation between Nordic countries and Russia has played a part in the process of shaping the Nordic response to Russia's aggressive behaviour.

Nordic NATO members base their security policy, also towards Russia, on the expectation that their allies would come to their rescue during a conflict (the article 5 commitment), and on the solidarity with other members of the alliance who could themselves face security related challenges. However, since NATO is presented in the Russian official doctrines as the main source of strategic challenge to Russia, their NATO membership that is to secure them against external threats may make them also more exposed to Russian reactions. The dominant concern in the Nordic countries today is therefore not the fear of Russian direct aggression against them, but rather the question of a spill-over effect, i.e. Russia's decision to use military power against them as a means of protecting its strategic assets that could be triggered by the conflict between Russia and the West not involving the Nordic countries directly in the first place.

The need to find a balance between deterrence and reassurance of Russia has been one of the fundamentals of the Norwegian policy towards Russia prior to the Ukrainian crisis. In the aftermath of the crisis Norway has decided to rebalance these two key elements of its strategy. More attention is today paid to the element of deterrence, which is epitomized by the Norwegian decision to allow a quasi-permanent deployment of the US troops on the Norwegian soil taken in 2017 and by the Norwegian policy of upgrading the country's military capabilities. As to the policy of reassurance, it is mostly about reassuring not Russia but rather Norway's NATO allies that they can count on Norway as a reliable ally. Similar policies focusing on increasing deterrence potential have been adopted by other Nordic countries that operate in the same international environment.

In addition to being members of the EU and/or NATO the Nordic countries have also embarked on a closer defence cooperation among them through the so-called NORDEF framework that is to help them address practical questions related to their national defence policies. The way the Nordic countries have chosen to transform their military structures is another important factor influencing their policy choices vis-à-vis Russia. Finland, Norway and Denmark have retained conscription-based system, while Sweden abolished conscription in 2010 but has recently reintroduced it, partly in response to worsening security situation in the region caused by Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Finally, the Nordic countries' policies towards Russia are also informed by their historical experience. Norway has never been at war with Russia and has decided to keep some communication lines with Russia open in order to minimize the risk of conflict. Sweden has the historical experience of losing the regional great power game against Russia and has adopted a far more sceptical line towards Russia. Finland has the experience of being a part of the Russian empire and fighting and losing two wars against Russia and of being

forced to accommodate Russian/Soviet strategic interests through the policy of finlandization. For all those historical reasons the country decided to retain a high level of national deterrence potential to make Russia think twice before making any aggressive moves against this country. Denmark has the experience of a dynastic connection with Russia and that of being Russia's ally in its wars against Sweden and other European great powers. However, being a small country that can suffer heavily in the case of the conflict in the region Denmark values its membership in NATO and its participation in the Nordic cooperation far higher than the historical memory of close cooperation with Russia that is viewed as the main source of strategic instability in the region.

All the factors listed and briefly analysed above are going to shape the Nordic countries' policies towards Russia in many years to come, or at least to the moment when Russia and the West will settle their accounts. Although playing an important role in the region, the Nordic countries have a limited ability to influence the choices made by the key international players, including Russia, and their policies will therefore remain mostly reactive and not pro-active.