

In Memoriam: Ronald Asmus 1957-2011

Toomas Hendrik Ilves, president

When Ron Asmus died on the 30th of April this year I lost a friend of 27 years, a man I knew for years as a buddy and colleague during the Cold War and who later, completely unpredictably, became one of my and indeed Estonia's closest collaborators in the long trek from "former Soviet republic" to full-fledged NATO and EU membership.

When I went to work as an analyst in the Research Dept of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE-RL) in 1984, one of the first persons to stick his head into my cubicle/office was an ebullient red-haired American who worked in the adjacent office in the basement of the Radios, as everyone called them. "Hi, I'm Ron, welcome to the cellar". The basement was where the new and generally 30-something analysts were put. As part of the Reagan-era boost in Congressional funding for RFE-RL, the Research and Analysis Dept (RAD) has been beefed up as well; young(ish) research analysts were hired to deepen and broaden academic coverage of the target areas, at that time Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Ron had just come on board to cover the "DDR", along with Barbara von Ow, who later went on to be the East European editor of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

There were many of us. The Reagan administration, in its commitment to significantly increase spending on U.S. efforts to debilitate the USSR and its satrapies in Eastern Europe had decided that in addition to boosting military expenditures also to better fund RFE-RL. Later this was to be called "soft power". One area to benefit was the Research Department, whose role was to write analyses and reports in English about developments in what were called "Target countries". Today, when reporting from these countries is routine, we have forgotten how little of what went on in Eastern and Central Europe ever made the news in the West. Universities and think tanks provided monographs but little on current events, Western correspondents posted in

Moscow reported on who stood next to whom on the Lenin Mausoleum on May Day. Intelligence agencies wrote classified analyses for their own authorities, which never reached a broader audience.

It was the role of the Research and Analysis Department of the Radios to fill the gaping lacunae in public understanding of this part of the world. With the Reagan-era funding increase the Radios hired a batch of young analysts who knew their respective areas. These represented a new generation of analysts, to use a term that today has been inflated into meaninglessness.

These were Western-educated, mainly Western-born students of their home countries who could no longer be written off as "embittered right-wing emigrés" for whom western academic standards were unknown and who allegedly had their own home country axes to grind. Janusz Bugajski from Poland, Jiri Pehe and Vlad Sobell from the erstwhile Czechoslovakia, Dzintra Bungs from Latvia, Saulius and Kestutis Girnius from Lithuania, Vlad Socor from Romania, Roman Solchanyk and Bohdan Nahaylo from Ukraine, this writer and later Riina Kionka from Estonia and Ron Asmus, the son of German immigrants to the United States were all as adept in English as any colleague from the old WASP establishment. Yet we were all native speakers of our respective „target countries“ and never given to the patronizing smugness that so permeated „area studies“ in earlier years.

Today in Estonia, where the term „analyst“ connotes more often than not a pretentiously self-important and thoughtful mien accompanying an opinion piece based on little evidence or analysis and a fair dose of vitriol and „visionary“ theorizing, to call someone an analyst is often more a term of an ironic derision. The standards demanded by RAD, however, left no room for posing. No *ad hominem* attacks, no attacks, period. All papers were based on open sources, no rumours, no scuttlebutt. If you had a theory you had to prove it to the deputy director, who didn't take kindly to theorizing, and would test us by offering an alternative hypothesis. If you couldn't rule it out, you couldn't theorize. The goal, after all was to provide short (up to four pages, single space), useful, up-to-date academic quality papers for the policy making establishments of the West. Read by virtually all Western foreign ministries, think tanks dealing with the East, RAD reports were a service that probably did more to burnish the reputation of the Radios than the broadcasts, which were of course in languages few in the West understood. While none of us probably noticed when we were in the middle of it, but most of us today recognize the Research and Analysis Dept of the RFE-RL, headed by the late George Urban, former editor of *Encounter*,

as the most exciting intellectual cauldron of its time, an unmatched today by any institute or think tank dealing with Eastern and Central Europe. And Ron was one of the best analysts working there.

Ron and I became pals. After work we would go off to the Englischergarten beer garden, grouse about our superiors and tell funny stories of the ludicrousness of the communists in the countries we respectively covered. Or we worked late. We loved our jobs, and neither of us could get over the luck of being able to write about and research what we were intensely interested in anyway, areas — the communist dictatorships in East Germany and Estonia — that were not quite the attention-grabbers in the West. And that this was our *job*.

As the dull and changeless world of communist Europe became suddenly a focal point of interest, our days became longer, our excitement greater. We used to joke that we were indeed odd people because the goal of our jobs was to make ourselves redundant, useless, i.e. unemployed.

It was a goal worth working for. As the glacis of Soviet run communism melted and fractured, so too the Research Dept. Ron left the Radios first. As the DDR collapsed and then disappeared, so too the need for an expert on what quickly became just a poorer part of a democratic, reunited Germany. Ron returned to the U.S. to work for the think tank *The Rand Corporation* as did Roman Solchanyk. Working on the security side of German reunification, i.e. ensuring that a unified Federal Republic would also remain in the Alliance began Ron's transformation from DDR expert to security policy guru.

Others as well went off to new challenges faced by a liberated Europe. Jiri Pehe became Vaclav Havel's foreign policy advisor. Janus Bugajski went to Washington to CSIS. Estonia meanwhile re-established its independence. I had, in 1988 been yanked by the management to the broadcasting side, against my wishes, and as I was promised, just temporarily, but then all hell broke loose in the Soviet Union and I was asked to reconsider and stay on. After the re-establishment of Estonian independence, my successor in RAD, Riina Kionka, left as well to join the Estonian foreign service. RAD slowly withered.

Ron and I stayed in touch with the then still new-fangled wonder of e-mail.

In 1993, after I was posted to Washington as Estonian ambassador, I flew to California to visit Ron at Rand in Santa Monica. Ron and Steve Larrabee were in the process of finishing a ten volume analysis of the pros and cons of a possible enlargement of NATO commissioned by the German government. The powerpoint presentation they had prepared only talked about Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. A version of this analysis by Ron, Richard Kugler and Stephen Larrabee appeared in short article form in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993.

"What about us?" I asked. Larrabee and Asmus looked at me blankly. „We hadn't thought about that.“ It wasn't in the cards right now. Germany had not asked. Indeed, no one asked. NATO enlargement to the Baltic Countries was not on anyone's agenda within the Alliance. Some governments, especially Germany's was adamantly opposed, and at that time even to enlargement of the European Union to include Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Yet Ron thought about these issues and realized the dangers to European security if the remaining democracies, those not invited to join the Alliance, were to remain outside. He was one of the first to sense the fears we had felt for some time: a one-time only expansion that did not include us would send a dangerous signal that our independence is a temporary development and that we were not that important to the West. His first thoughts on the issue were published in the security policy journal *Survival* in an article "NATO Expansion: The Next Steps" in 1995, causing howls of indignation all around when he suggested that the day Poland becomes a NATO ally, Estonia should become a member of the EU. It was an idea picked up by Richard Holbrooke, the new Assistant Secretary for Europe (viz. my obituary for Dick Holbrooke in

Diplomaatia
nr 89).

What to do with „the rest of us“ became one of Ron's paramount concerns after the Vishegrad enlargement itself. Ron and Stephen Larrabee's article, „NATO and the Have-Nots: Reassurance after Enlargement“ in

Foreign Affairs

in 1996 raised the profile of that problem even higher.

Having become one of the leading thinkers on NATO expansion in the *pro* camp and with NATO enlargement to the Vishegrad countries moving on to the political agenda in 1996, Ron left Rand to become at Madeleine Albright's request Deputy Assistance Secretary of State in the second Clinton Administration, where his brief was simple: to expand the Alliance.

By this time I once again had been yanked by the scruff of my neck to a new job, this time to run the Foreign Ministry. Suddenly I found my old friend from over a decade earlier, to be my primary interlocutor on one of Estonia's two most existential issues, EU and NATO membership. To name Ron as the ideologue on NATO enlargement (as some have), misses the point. Ideologues were many, but he was the architect and general contractor rolled into one. Ron did it, worrying about and working on all the key as well as minor issues. He lobbied the Congress, nudged recalcitrant East Europeans to do their homework, set up the „Membership Action Plan“ to ensure the new members' military affairs were in order. After ratification of the Polish NATO accession treaty ran into snags in the U.S. Senate over „historical issues“, Ron came see Lennart Meri and me to strongly advise us to set up already in 1999 a commission to study war crimes committed on Estonian soil. Ron's concern was that the reputation of Estonia be fully open and clear regarding the Nazi occupation to avoid the problems the Polish treaty had encountered in Congress. Lennart agreed to do it but expanded the Historical commission to

include both the Soviet and Nazi war-time occupations.

Ron was equally concerned that the presence of an OSCE mission in Tallinn would be used as an excuse to block Estonian membership. With his side-kick and comrade-in-diplomacy, Walter Andruszyszyn, senior U.S. diplomat and later National Security Council adviser to the President, Ron spent countless hours working with Estonia as well as with EU and NATO members of the OSCE and the High Commissioner for National Minorities, Max van der Stoel to close the Mission, which had long outlived any purpose, save to sully Estonia's reputation.

The political drama of the 1999 enlargement of NATO to Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic is best described in Ron's own book, *Opening NATO's Door*. Ron also left in manuscript form a book on the Baltic enlargement that I hope will find publication.

With his strong Democratic Party credentials, Ron left the State Department when the Bush Administration came into office and moved to Brussels to head the Brussels branch of the U.S think tank, *The German-American Marshall Fund* or GMF as it is better known, the premier brain trust of trans-atlantic relations. No longer an official of the U.S. Government, Ron became a member of the Committee to Enlarge NATO, a non-partisan group of leading thinkers and political figures committed to make Europe „whole and free“. Democrats on the board or helping it included Madeleine Albright, Zbig Bzrezinski, Phil Gordon (currently Assistant secretary of state for Europe); Jeremy Rosner and Page Reffe. Republicans included Bruce Jackson, Robert Kagan, Richard Perle and Julie Finley (later U.S. ambassador to the OSCE): Liberals and Neo-cons who rarely agreed on anything... except that NATO needed to expand.

On the government side, too, Baltic membership remained on track after the change in administration in 2000. Fortunately for all of us, Baltic State membership in NATO was in the U.S genuinely a bi-partisan cause. Walter Andruszyszyn as a career Foreign Service officer continued to work on expansion. Nick Burns, Victoria Nuland and Kurt Volker, the three people who served as U.S. ambassadors to NATO were all committed to the cause.

Ron meanwhile found new causes to which apply his analytic rigor and political acumen: bringing in the Wider Europe to the Western Fold, strengthening democracy and rule of law in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Ron and my paths ran together and intertwined it seems, almost permanently. Georgia became a primary concern of his. Partially as part of his desire to see the Wider Europe as part of the democratic security architecture, partially because like so many of us, he saw in Georgia's courageous and bold reform process a flicker of that same hope we had seen in our part of the world a decade earlier. Out of that interest and his knowledge of the country came Ron's last book, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*, which is a gem of concision and analysis in the best RAD tradition.

Less noticed perhaps in Estonia, Ron worked hard against the increasing antagonism between the U.S. and Europe, especially in the wake of the Iraq War. Running one of Europe's best annual foreign policy conferences, the Brussels Forum, Ron was always ahead of the thinking in the foreign ministries on either side of the Atlantic. Sometimes, too, we disagreed. When he put together a letter from East Europeans expressing concern over the apparent lack of interest of the Obama administration in Eastern Europe I told him it would be counterproductive. The time for collective open letters from Eastern Europe is over, I argued, we did that when we weren't real countries; now we were. He saw it differently. Time will tell who was right.

We shall all miss Ron, even if we never knew him or all that he accomplished. We shall miss him because our membership in the Alliance was never a given. Had there been no Ron Asmus, we would be, if not a different country, certainly living in a dramatically different security climate here on the Eastern littoral of the Baltic Sea. Eastern Europe's relations with its Western Partners would have been different. Relations with the U.S. as well.

No one I have met was as committed a trans-atlanticist as Ron Asmus. As an American son of German immigrants, his whole life, it seemed, was dedicated to making stronger the bonds that allowed the West to win the Cold War and to bring countries like Estonia into the democratic camp.

I used to wonder, where are *our* generation's great men to mould Europe's architecture, men and women who are great not only in their own countries but everywhere, those like George Kennan, George Marshall and Dean Acheson, Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet, who created the Post-World War II consensus, that turned war-ravaged Western Europe into the political, economic and security powerhouse it became, those rare individuals who had the clarity of vision and sense of purpose to do what they did in the late 40s and early fifties. Now, when I look back on the past twenty years I can name at least one of the great men of our time: Ronald Dietrich Asmus, who brought my country and ten others back into a Europe, genuinely whole and free... and secure.

Thank you, Ron.