

The case of the Baltic Sea area

SPATIAL POLITICS & FUZZY REGIONALISM

By **Norbert Götz**

Historical atlases are an illustrative remedy against geographical essentialism. Shifting political borders as an outcome of power struggles, and the reframing of bounded space resulting from the establishment of new hierarchies of meaning, make geography a moving target in history. Europe has been a container for varying sets of sub-regions at different points in time, showing that history involves a permanent renegotiation of space. Basic divisions include those of classical antiquity, the divide between South and North, and the Cold War distinction of Western and Eastern Europe (a view with predecessors among the eighteenth century “inventors” of Eastern Europe).¹ The currently prevalent distinctions between Western, Northern, Central, Southern, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe represents one of many possible ways to rescale Europe into meaningful units larger than the nation-state, but smaller than the continent.² Other suggestions refer to the correlating notions of northeastern Europe and the Baltic Sea region, an entity that reappeared on mental maps with the fall of the Iron Curtain.³ While none of the areas mentioned is unhistorical, and while borders are often a matter of contention, they all represent significant perceptions of spatio-cultural coherence.

However, geography may also be fragmented. Colonial empires are non-contiguous geographical conglomerations, their cohesion arising

from bonds that bridge unattached areas. They may live on as “transterritorial” regions, such as a Commonwealth or la Francophonie.⁴ Concepts like “Scandia major” or “Greater Norden” have clustered the Nordic states together with “exclaves” like the Netherlands, Canada, Japan, and other remote countries that see themselves bound by common values and a similar conduct of foreign affairs.⁵ Another example of relational patchiness is the so-called Western European and Others Group in the United Nations. It is considered a distinct regional electoral group, although it encompasses countries like Australia and Canada.⁶ As applied to politics, space and region are flexible concepts that may stretch our geographical imagination and even take the edge off a language of “othering”.

Scholarly approaches likewise reveal great differences in understanding regions. They are seen as territorial representations of given natural or cultural traits, or as political or heuristic

tools that enable researchers to analyze network patterns and imagined communities on other scales than that of the nation-state.⁷ Studies assuming regional substance, when looked at in their mutually contradictory diversity, corroborate constructivist epistemology. However, constructivist approaches do not preclude the essentializing tendencies of a “regionalism as prescription”.⁸ Constructivism has been an inspiration for region-building projects

abstract

This article engages with political region building by examining the diverging conceptions of the Baltic Sea region since the 1970s. It maps the fuzzy geography arising from the enmeshment of territory with a multitude of frameworks for regional action. After 1989, the region became the object of interregional and neighborhood policies established by the European Union, with shifting territorial delimitations according to various internal and geopolitical needs of the day. Drawing on functional, relational, and administrative perspectives, it is shown how spatial definitions surrounding the Baltic Sea region have varied over the past fifty years, revealing those transnational connections that have been valued as worthwhile political investments.

KEYWORDS: Northeastern Europe; EU; macro-region; international organizations; region-building; marine environment; neighborhood policy

in which present-day academics assume “the role of Herder, Fichte, Mazzini, and the like, in the new era” of multilevel governance.⁹ Hence, Ole Wæver, a major proponent of constructivism in the study of international relations, maintained in the late 1990s that the Baltic Sea region had by that time been “talked into existence”, something that he believed correlated with the establishment of a regional identity.¹⁰ The assumption that there is a region per se, rather than a multitude of territorial designs adjusted to distinct relational patterns, functions, and administrative customization, is not substantially altered when based on the notion of historical contingency rather than on certain objectified features. Neither is it changed by the awareness that a region, despite being spatial, need not refer to a clearly delineated space, and that the Baltic Sea region is determined by the connectivity of its nodal area rather than by any distinct perimeter.¹¹ Therefore, while a constructivist approach constitutes a necessary step towards the critical study of regions, it alone is not sufficient. Constructivism becomes a critical force only when exercised from a rigid academic standpoint without prescriptive investment in the region-building enterprise itself.

The present study concurs with the observation that ontological confusion prevails about what the Baltic Sea region is, and that boundaries significant to the region have been inadequately studied, but it does not content itself with an examination of recent EU policy.¹² Rather, it shows how fuzzy geography may, in fact, become enmeshed in human agency. It does this by investigating diverging territorial framings of the Baltic Sea region in a variety of international organizations and policy programs since the 1970s, arguing that spatial definitions surrounding the Baltic Sea region have incorporated intersecting administrative, functional, and relational perspectives of many sorts over the past fifty years. These scripts are revealing beyond the region itself and are gauges of the models of transnational collaboration envisioned by the political projects to which they have been attached.

Interreg: spatial planning visions of the 1990s

The history of the Baltic Sea region in European Territorial Cooperation (ETC; better known as the EU Interreg programs) shows how the definition of a geographical entity can vary considerably, even within the same program structure. This scheme is a key instrument of the so-called cohesion policy. Thus, the current Interreg Baltic Sea Region Program for the period 2014 to 2020 states as its overall objective the strengthening of “the integrated territorial development and cooperation for a more innovative, better accessible and sustainable Baltic Sea region”.¹³

In principle, the program includes the EU members Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden; the partner countries

Belarus and Norway; and the Northeast of Germany and the northwestern Federal District of Russia.¹⁴ However, an overall integrated development has become an increasingly intricate matter due to political tension with Russia, first in connection with the conflict in Georgia, and more recently, following the country’s annexation of the Crimea and participation in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.¹⁵ The Russian government failed to sign an economic agreement with the EU in connection with the previous Interreg program and, as a consequence organizations based in Russia did not become eligible for funding (although various forms of involvement were practiced).¹⁶ For the current program, it is unclear if and when financial agreements with Russia – and now Belarus as well – might be signed. On its website, the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Program encourages applicants to associate Russian or Belarusian partners, adding the reservation that funding for them needs to be sought from alternative sources.¹⁷ The discrepancy between a larger official area of EU-sponsored regional cooperation and a more restricted de facto area renders the meaning of the “Baltic Sea region” ambiguous as a space of cross border cooperation. Interreg maps have also usually cut off the eastern parts of the Russian territory that was formally included.

Moreover, the Interreg III B and IV B programs for the Baltic Sea region – in force from 2000 to 2006 and from 2007 to 2013, respectively – had a different territorial outreach than the current one, only covering the western and central parts of Belarus and the westernmost districts of Russia.¹⁸ Even then, however, the European Commission took into account a request of the governments of Finland and Sweden that cooperation with Norway and Russia in the Barents Sea area be among the priorities of the Baltic Sea program.¹⁹

THE FIRST INTERREG PROGRAM specifically designed for the Baltic Sea region – II C, in force between 1997 and 1999 – still represented a markedly different understanding of the region. While involving the same eleven countries that reappeared in subsequent programs, only the territory of Finland and the three Baltic republics was regarded as entirely belonging to the Baltic Sea region. As is still the case with Germany and Russia, the major powers in the area, only the littoral zones and selected hinterland areas from the five other countries were understood as forming part of the region at that time.

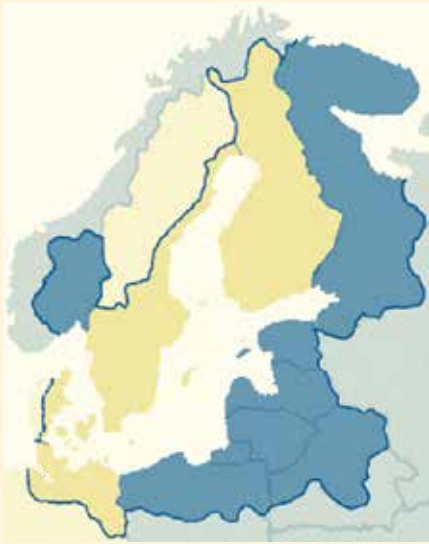
The consecutive reframing and resizing of the Baltic Sea region in the definitions of the same EU program structure il-

lustrate that the determination of this space is subject to considerations of expediency and policy-making. Its borders are fluid and subject to negotiation and evolution. While such adaptability may be a strength in political terms, it entails – as Figure 1 illustrates – a great deal of contingency.

The Baltic Sea region of the later Interreg programs corresponds approximately to the area that the VA-

“DESPITE MINOR DEVIATIONS, THE VASAB UNDERSTANDING OF THE BALTIC SEA REGION HAS GENERALLY PREFIGURED THAT OF THE EUROPEAN TERRITORIAL COOPERATION SCHEME.”

Figure 1: The spatial evolution of EU Interreg programs for the Baltic Sea region



Interreg II C, 1997–1999, encompassing mainly coastal areas.



Interreg III B / IV B, encompassing mainly nation-states.



Interreg V B, 2014–2020, including Belarus and northwestern Russia at large.

SAB network for spatial planning and development adopted in the early 1990s. VASAB stands for Vision and Strategies Around the Baltic Sea. Apart from the fact that VASAB has always included the whole of Belarus, the only differences between it and the Interreg programs concern countries understood as not entirely belonging to the Baltic Sea region, namely Germany and Russia. VASAB does not encompass Bremen and the Regierungsbezirk Lüneburg in Germany; its geographical extent in Russia is the one adopted by the Interreg III B and IV B programs, not the present extension that, if applied, would include the whole of northwestern Russia.²⁰ Despite minor deviations, the VASAB understanding of the Baltic Sea region has generally prefigured that of the European Territorial Cooperation scheme. In this particular sense, VASAB has achieved its goal of contributing to “a strong identity enabling the BSR [Baltic Sea region] to play an important role within Europe and the world”.²¹

Nevertheless, the assumption of territorial integration, in the sense of intellectual and infrastructural reciprocity, and a corresponding orientation for action among the concerned parties encounters difficulties. This is illustrated by the fact that an area that has been branded the NEBI area, where NEBI stood for North European and Baltic Sea Integration, largely coincides with the VASAB territory and the later Interreg programs, although excluding Belarus and parts of Poland. A *NEBI Yearbook* was published parallel to the EU eastern enlargement negotiations in the years 1998–2003. The creators of the acronym apologized for adding to the European “alphabet soup”, but maintained that they knew of no viable alternative. According to them, “North European” was frequently understood as a synonym for Scandinavia, and people in the Barents area – the northern parts of Scandinavia and Russia – “would have little pa-

tience with a book placing their region under the heading ‘Baltic Sea Integration’”.²²

Although a definition very similar to that of NEBI continued to be used for the Baltic Sea region by the Baltic Development Forum’s periodical *State of the Region Report*,²³ the terminological explanation of “NEBI” reveals that experts in the field regard the area currently defined by the European Union as the Baltic Sea region as being at odds with the inhabitants’ identities. A recent study of mental maps among groups of high school students in Sweden, on the Åland islands, and in Estonia suggests that, on a deeper level, the issue is that as yet a Baltic Sea identity has barely evolved beyond the circle of an activist elite.²⁴

Helcom: functional delimitations of the 1970s and their update

Despite the shifting notions of the Baltic Sea region and its questionable conflation with the Barents Sea area, the region is not subject to unmitigated arbitrariness. The 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea entails provisions for enclosed or semi-enclosed seas like the Baltic Sea. It mentions “bordering states” and requests their cooperation in regard to the management of living resources, marine environment, and scientific research policy.²⁵ Although there is no consensus on exactly where the Baltic Sea begins, and whether the Danish Straits and the Kattegat – the sea between Jutland and Sweden – belong to it, this disagreement has no effect on which the adjoining countries are, and a general agreement prevails that the Baltic Sea itself is the key constituent of the eponymous region.²⁶ Therefore, a minimalistic regional understanding of the Baltic Sea region comprises the Baltic Sea itself with its coastline and islands. This concept corresponds roughly with

the domain of the two bodies of Baltic Sea cooperation that date back to the time of the Cold War, the International Baltic Sea Fishery Commission (IBSFC) and the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (better known as the Helsinki Commission, or HELCOM). Multilateral collaboration became possible in the area after the signing of the Treaty Concerning the Basis of Relations Between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic in 1972.²⁷

IBSFC was established by a provision of the Convention on Fishing and Conservation of the Living Resources in the Baltic Sea and the Belts, signed 1973 in Gdansk by the sovereign states bordering the Baltic Sea. The title of the convention simultaneously discriminates between and conjoins the Baltic Sea and the Danish straits (the natural channels between Jutland, the islands of Funen and Zealand, and Sweden), whereas the straits are subsumed under the Baltic Sea in the name of the commission. The northern demarcation of the Belts, “bounded in the west by a line as from Hasenore Head to Griben Point, from Korshage to Spodsbjerg and from Gilbjerg Head to the Kullen,” adopted the delimitation of the 1959 North-East Atlantic Fisheries Convention and, in essence, an interwar Scandinavian definition of the southern boundary of the Kattegat.²⁸

THE WARSAW-BASED IBSFC was made responsible for the protection and rational exploitation of living marine resources in the Baltic Sea, although, according to its critics, it has regularly allowed non-sustainable catches of fish. Its composition has changed several times due to the European Community representing its member states since 1984, the EU enlargements of 1995 and 2004, and the dissolution of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Soviet Union (the latter being succeeded by four states with a Baltic Sea coast). However, only sovereign states adjoining the Baltic Sea, and the EC/EU as a supranational aggregate of some of these states, have ever been members of the commission. After its 2004 enlargement, the EU considered the IBSFC redundant, and the organization was subsequently dissolved, its task being left to bilateral negotiations between the EU and Russia.²⁹ A new framework agreement for this purpose, with a geographical delimitation identical to that of the Gdansk Convention, has been in place since 2009.³⁰ While the agreement has not yet entered into force, it is being provisionally applied.³¹

The other Baltic Sea organization that dates back to the time of the Cold War and remains active is HELCOM, a discussion forum and monitoring body that was established pursuant to a convention signed in 1974 in the Finnish capital. This convention took effect in 1980 and is regarded as a political milestone of international ecopolitics because it dealt with the various sources of marine pollution in a single document and influenced the development of the UN Law of the Sea.³² The convention framed its subject matter “as an integral part of the peaceful cooperation and mutual understanding between all European

States”, alluding to the simultaneously ongoing process of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). In addition, it referred to the Gdansk Convention on fishery and living resources, and expressed a general desire “to develop further regional co-operation in the Baltic Sea Area”. It defined the relevant territory for its purpose as “the Baltic Sea proper with the Gulf of Bothnia, the Gulf of Finland and the entrance to the Baltic Sea bounded by the parallel of the Skaw [Skagen] in the Skagerrak at 57°44.8’N” (i.e., the northern border of the Kattegat).³³

WHILE A HOLISTIC perspective in combination with a general will for collaboration resulted in joint capacities to tackle problems of natural resources and the environment, the application of a macro-regional scale, encompassing the entire Baltic Sea and requiring scientific-technical solutions, has also diverted attention from the need for local measures, public engagement, and even ecological concerns.³⁴

The two institutions that were agreed upon in the 1970s represent the least common denominator of spatial format which, by extension, included all the Baltic Sea coastal states. The minimal cooperation that followed in areas of evident common interests like the management of fishing resources and environmental protection, was probably the maximum that could be achieved at the time.³⁵ These states were not identical with those of today, since the Soviet Union and the GDR still existed. Norway has never been part of the cooperative agreement based on these purely marine-functional conventions – not even after 1989. The Cold War, the period during which the Iron Curtain split the Baltic Sea into a northwest and a southeast half, is thus helpful in defining a functionally determined core of the Baltic Sea region. However, such a definition is not more than a topographical identification of the Baltic Sea, although it has been suggested that “the Baltic Sea itself” (rather than its adversarial history) may constitute an embryo of identity.³⁶ In any case, a shortcoming of the Marine Environment Protection Convention of 1974 was that relevant functional relationships like the inflow of inland waters and land-based pollution could be taken into account only indirectly, that is, when they had already entered the sea.³⁷

For this reason, the HELCOM convention was revised in 1992 to include inland waters connected to the Baltic Sea, thus referring to the whole drainage basin with a total of 132 rivers.³⁸ This space is not dissimilar to the VASAB, NEBI, or current Interreg definitions of the Baltic Sea region. The most profound difference is that Norway remains external to the region. Berlin and Hamburg are also not part of the area, and the Russian territory is more limited, excluding the area with waterways that feed into the Barents Sea. Only on a close inspection can Norway be said to be included because a few of the country’s creeks flow eastward towards the Baltic Sea. Likewise, some minor waters from Ukraine, the Czech Repub-

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lic, and Slovakia feed into the Baltic Sea. Such marginal phenomena have not caused these countries to become members of HELCOM. Belarus is also not a member of the Commission, although significant portions of the country are connected to the Baltic Sea through the rivers Daugava, Neman, and Vistula, and although the cities of Brest and Grodno were included in a list of HELCOM “hot spots” as early as 1992 in connection with the reform of the organization.³⁹ The governments of Belarus and Ukraine currently have observer status in HELCOM.

The revision of the Helsinki Convention in 1992, which entered into force in 2000, occasioned a minor adjustment in the definition of the entrance of the Baltic Sea, which is now set at 57° 44' 43" N latitude. While the move is quantitatively negligible, amounting to little more than a kilometer difference, it is qualitatively significant as it entails a shift from a man-made landmark, the Skaw lighthouse, to the geological formation of the Skaw headland as a point of reference. The understanding of the Baltic Sea, including the Kattegat, has thereby acquired a solely natural determination.

A DEFINITION OF the Baltic Sea region by its catchment area is particularly relevant for the pursuit of ecological issues, but it is also applicable in unexpected political areas. The Baltic University Programme (BUP), coordinated at Uppsala, Sweden, since 1991, has a twofold agenda in the fields of education, research, cooperation with societal actors, and information for society at large. The program is meant to support sustainable development (including economic, social, and ecological aspects) on the one hand, and the development of democracy and democratic cultures on the other. The tying of a general issue such as democracy to a concrete ecological concern in a geographical scope defined by the flow of water is probably best explained by the conjuncture of democracy promotion and environmental protection at the top of the list of official Swedish political priorities. This link is especially strong in the field of development aid, and, in fact, the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) was the initial funder of BUP in the 1990s. While the BUP statutes define the Baltic Sea region as the drainage basin of the Baltic Sea and the Kattegat, and those invited to participate are institutions located in this area, some of the approximately 225 currently participating bodies are located outside this space. One is the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, which hosts one of the three associated secretariats. However, with the exception of one university in the US, all the participating institutions are based in a country with at least some outflow to the Baltic Sea.⁴⁰

While the sea and its catchment area can plausibly serve to delimit the Baltic Sea region as a distinct ecosphere, environmental concerns cannot be thus limited. Polity-oriented environmentalism and issues of air-based pollution suggest a more open, trans-regional perspective. For example, while realizing that it may appear as “a geographical hybrid” to include the Barents Sea in the Baltic Sea, a Norwegian author has argued that it makes sense in a functional environmentalist perspective.⁴¹ However, environmentalism aside, an evident physical and functional connection to the Baltic Sea is no guarantee of identification with it.⁴²

CBSS: relations to the North Atlantic

A further definition of the Baltic Sea region is a radically widened one, in which the region is seen as stretching from Greenland via Iceland and the North Atlantic to Norway, down to Denmark and alpine Germany, via Poland and Belarus to Russia, and all the way to Vladivostok and into the Pacific. This vast area includes significant parts of the northern hemisphere. Such a construction may appear to be an unwarranted region-building exercise that requires considerable imagination. However, such a version of the Baltic Sea region is an actual one, founded upon the agency of nation-states, which continue to be the most significant entities conducting international relations.

The establishment of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), on a joint Danish-German initiative in 1992 by the foreign ministers of the nine Baltic Sea coastal states, Norway, and a representative of the EU Commission illustrates this. The idea of a Baltic Sea council had earlier been proposed as a group of national representatives, although with the participation of Germany and Russia limited to provincial authorities adjacent to the Baltic Sea. However, when the state government of Schleswig-Holstein, which had started to pursue an independent regional foreign policy during the perestroika thaw, invited the surrounding national governments to prepare for the council, the German foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, insisted on the foreign affairs prerogative of the nation-state. He made it clear that the Federal Republic of Germany did not endorse the initiative by provincial politicians in Kiel, and announced that he had already agreed with the Danish government to organize a summit of foreign ministers of the Baltic Sea region in Copenhagen that would consider the establishment of a Baltic Sea council.⁴³ According to his colleague, the Danish foreign minister Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, the presence of the German federal government was indispensable for Baltic Sea cooperation because a country with substantial weight was needed to “make the Russians behave properly” (while the other governments were tasked with making the Balts behave).⁴⁴

The CBSS meets biannually, its foreign ministers alternating with a summit of heads of government. Since 1998, the organization, which is a forum for confidence building and declaratory politics rather than actual policy-making,⁴⁵ has a permanent secretariat in Stockholm. Despite its vague overall political role, particularly in times of increasing dissonance between the West with Russia, the CBSS has been characterized as “a prime symbol of institutionalized Baltic space” and has been referred to accordingly by EU bodies.⁴⁶ The current crisis is evident in the fact that since spring 2014 CBSS summits and ministerial meetings have been cancelled, although CBSS senior officials continue to meet and projects continue.⁴⁷

In principle, the CBSS already had a North Atlantic dimension at its foundation. The Faroe Islands and Greenland are autonomous Danish territories that are not included in the European Union. However, contrary to European integration, it is formally not the state of Denmark, but the Kingdom of Denmark that is a CBSS member, and this kingdom encompasses three territories: Denmark proper, the Faeroes, and Greenland.⁴⁸ Norway was also a founding member, despite an initial debate as to whether

it and, in particular, Iceland were eligible to become members of the CBSS.⁴⁹ The Norwegian delegation to the CBSS founding meeting included a representative of the country's south-easternmost province, Østfold, and, it was claimed, that this province was located "at the mouth of the Baltic Sea". By contrast, at the time of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union proposed to turn the Baltic Sea into a "Sea of Peace" Norwegian politicians had underlined that their country was not a Baltic Sea state.⁵⁰ On yet other occasions the Baltic Sea area has been described as a "Norwegian' neighborhood area".⁵¹

Iceland had not been invited to the founding meeting of the CBSS and initially stood apart. However, the Icelandic government later campaigned for membership and applied for accession in 1994 in order to avoid isolation in the face of intensifying cooperation across the Baltic Sea and the pending EU membership of the other Nordic countries. One year later, the CBSS accepted Iceland as a new member.⁵² The Committee of Senior Officials' report on the application states that consensus was reached on the issue during a meeting and that "it was agreed that Iceland's case is exceptional, and will not serve as a precedent."⁵³

Thus, despite Iceland being admitted, reservations about its membership are apparent. Statements by Icelandic politicians likewise indicate that they felt the need to justify their wish for inclusion. They interpreted the CBSS as a link between the Nordic countries and their neighbors around the Baltic Sea, and they emphasized historical connections from Hanseatic times to the independence of the three Baltic republics after World War I, when Iceland was granted sovereignty within a union with Denmark.⁵⁴ Iceland also enjoyed good-will in the region as the first country to have established diplomatic relations with the Baltic states in 1991. Iceland chaired the CBSS during the 2005/06 term and hosted the Sixth Baltic Sea States Summit in Reykjavík in 2006.⁵⁵ In a speech the following year, before the financial crisis changed the country's outlook, Foreign Minister Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir explained her country's role in Baltic Sea cooperation in relational terms:

Iceland might appear to some to be the odd man out when it comes to regional cooperation within the Baltic Sea Region. After all, you need only to look at the map to see that Iceland doesn't even lie near the Baltic Sea. However, this literal reading of the map obscures an important geopolitical truth: that as a Nordic Country, Iceland is closely intertwined into the Baltic Sea Region, both politically and economically. This fact is maybe best illustrated today in the active interest that Icelandic investors have taken in this region. Increased Icelandic investments in the Baltic Region did not come about as a result of any co-ordinated effort or intervention from the official level, but simply reflects the huge potential of this region, which Icelandic investors have

been quick to spot. There is every reason to be optimistic when it comes to the future of this region, especially if we succeed in building even stronger bridges between our countries.⁵⁶

The significance of the CBSS has been attributed to its general merit of encompassing potentially antagonistic states (i.e., including Russia in an essentially Western organization) rather than its "obviously limited regional value".⁵⁷ As an observer of the development of Baltic Sea cooperation in the late 1980s and early 1990s noted, the establishment of the CBSS as an intergovernmental organization meant that matters such as cultural affinities and regional identity were subordinated to the functional cooperation of nation-states.⁵⁸ Moreover, as the case of Iceland illustrates, the CBSS was also subordinated to prior patterns of identification and cooperation, such as that of the Nordic governments. Nevertheless, despite the "hijacking" of the project of the Baltic Sea region by nation-states, bottom-up initiatives sustained regional cooperation during periods of lost momentum by their official counterparts.⁵⁹ At the same time – as the inclusion of Iceland in the Baltic Sea NGO Forum illustrates – civil society interaction in the region remains heavily dependent on the public sector.⁶⁰

The Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), which has convened annually since 1991, has represented a wide geographical approach from the outset, but with a mixed overall record. Its first meeting was attended by Norwegian, Icelandic, Faroese, and Greenlandic delegates, along with representatives of assemblies adjoining the Baltic Sea and a few hinterland provinces (but not the German federal parliament, which only participated from the second conference on).⁶¹ By the late 1990s, North Atlantic participation in the BSPC had become irregular. Faroese legislators last attended a session in 2002, and their colleagues from Greenland have been absent since 2009. Iceland has missed nearly one-third of the meetings, but has been continuously present since 2012.⁶² When hosting the BSPC in Reykjavík in 2006, a meeting not attended by the neighboring North Atlantic legislatures, the President of the Icelandic Althingi "described how Icelanders view themselves as part of the Baltic Sea region, if not geographically, then politically and culturally".⁶³

ND and EUSBSR: administrative region building without resources

Over the years, the EU has adopted a variety of regional umbrella programs focusing on the Baltic Sea region. An abundance of bottom-up initiatives, academic signposting, and regional governance organizations have called the attention of EU policy makers to the Baltic Sea region as a prototype for the development of various macro-regional policy frames.⁶⁴

However, it was the self-promotion of actors from the region that was decisive, and while these EU programs have been introduced with considerable rhetorical effort, none of them created their own

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organization or announced funding in addition to existing programs.

In 1996, in preparation for the first CBSS summit of heads of government in Visby, the Swedish government urged the European Commission to draw up the Baltic Sea Region Initiative (BSRI).⁶⁵ The program's goal was to enhance political stability and economic development through improved coordination and increased focus on priority areas. It was assumed that the Baltic Sea region comprised about 60 million inhabitants, half of whom were EU citizens. This number indicates a restrictive view because it excludes, for example, the inland areas of Poland. However, in practice the initiative was based on various EU programs (such as Interreg, PHARE for prospective EU member states, and TACIS for other states emerging after the dissolution of the Soviet Union), and on those of international organizations such as CBSS and HELCOM.⁶⁶ Whether this was synergetic or parasitic may be answered with reference to a commentator who, after a few years, observed that the BSRI still needed "to demonstrate that the combined value of the various EU instruments employed in the region is greater than the sum of their parts". He subsumed it under EU Commission communications with an agenda-setting rather than a policy quality.⁶⁷ Some years later a German diplomat (then chairman of the CBSS Committee of Senior Officials) declared that the initiative had not had any strong impact.⁶⁸

Like the BSRI, the idea of a "Northern Dimension (ND) for the Policies of the European Union", officially adopted by the EU in 1998, came from an effort to maintain good relations with Russia, with an eye on the pending EU membership of the Baltic republics. Another parallel is the assertion that financial assistance need not be increased, and that overall policies can remain the same.⁶⁹ Hence, the term "dimension" meant increased attention paid to northern concerns, again within existing wider programs such as Interreg, PHARE, and TACIS.⁷⁰ The ND scheme became a catch all marketing strategy rather than a concrete political program. As it was difficult to pinpoint its policy content apart from its general area focus, officials have described it as a "non-policy".⁷¹

NEVERTHELESS, FOUR POLICY dimensions were developed over the years, among which the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (NDEP) stands out with its support fund based on state donations and managed by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). This fund facilitates local projects in northwestern Russia and Belarus and stood at € 347 million by the end of 2014, of which almost half was earmarked for nuclear waste management and the other half for environmental projects.⁷² Thus, despite its weak institutionalization and the fact that it is little known in foreign policy circles, the ND has been a more significant and longer-lasting feature of EU policy making than the short-lived BSRI.⁷³ Recently a group of donors assured the NDEP's continued existence until 2022.⁷⁴ While the advancement of the program has come to a halt, associates suggest that environmental cooperation should ideally be kept outside the realm of politics, and that the "NDEP will be able to re-start once the geopolitical situation has changed".⁷⁵

Like the acronym NEBI that was invented at about the same time, ND eschews stretching the geographically entrenched space of the Baltic Sea region into remote areas, preferring to subsume it under a more comprehensive (and vaguer) concept derived from a cardinal direction. With cooperation in the Arctic, the Barents area, Nordic neighborhood policies with eastern partners, and Baltic Sea cooperation as its pillars, the ND constitutes "a network of ideas with very different spatial shapes".⁷⁶ The discursive strategy behind the term ND – mirroring the critique of the European Parliament's Committee of the Regions on the BSRI, and brought to the EU agenda by the Finnish government's debut initiative as a member state – was the European mainstreaming of a variety of Finnish interests and the infusion of "the 'semantics of the periphery' with a positive sound".⁷⁷ The ND's overall extension has earlier been sketched as ranging "from Iceland on the west across to North-West Russia, from the Norwegian, Barents and Kara Seas in the North to the Southern coast of the Baltic Sea".⁷⁸ At the time of the Baltic States' accession to the EU, the ND was said to have moved from the high north to the Baltic Sea area, and it was later extended more broadly to Greenland and the European Arctic area. Despite such unclarity, it has always been at least as much eastern as northern.⁷⁹

The ND is a EU neighborhood program, including the EU candidate and, since 2004, member states Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, as well as closely cooperating countries like Norway and Iceland. However, northwest Russia has constantly been a major focus. From the beginning, ND was not merely a scheme towards EU neighbors, but a partner-oriented policy that gave them a voice in a political process that sought "to 'fly below the radar' of the high politics of EU-Russian relations and of Russian geopolitics".⁸⁰ Only in such a sense of functional cooperation at a subnational and local level has the Northern Dimension "encouraged a blurring of the frontiers" between the countries involved.⁸¹ Nevertheless, when the ND initiative was reinstated in 2006, the formal position of the partners was enhanced, becoming fully equal to that of the EU.⁸² While Russian commentators praise the unique model of joint ownership of an EU neighborhood policy, they also note its lack of achievement, apart from the NDEP.⁸³ The ND has been a disappointment for several reasons, but the strong position of Russia is one that has become increasingly aggravating as relations with the West have deteriorated. This has largely undermined the hope that the ND might function "as a 'face-saver' and a reminder of successful cooperation" between the EU and Russia.⁸⁴ Thus official websites connected to the ND and its various policies show that routines of cooperation had largely come to a halt by 2015.

When the European Parliament requested an EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), it observed that "the Baltic Sea has almost become an internal sea, a mare nostrum, of the European Union following the 2004 enlargement". The strategy, which was especially promoted by Sweden, was initially presented as a means to territorially refocus the ND.⁸⁵ Instead, the European Council distributed tasks in conjunction with the EUSBSR to cover internal matters of the EU, and with the ND for

external aspects of Baltic Sea cooperation.⁸⁶ Subsequent EUSBSR documents discuss collaboration with Russia as if the Northern Dimension was an instrument of the Baltic Sea Region Strategy, a reversal of its initial design.⁸⁷ Some quarters have perceived the overlapping geographical scope as a potential threat to the ND and its constructive engagement of Russia.⁸⁸ However, the EUSBSR has more generally turned regional institutions such as HELCOM, CBSS, and ND into platforms for the implementation of EU policies, particularly when dealing with Russia.⁸⁹

A semiofficial publication reveals confusion about the EUSBSR and the chaotic Baltic space. It mapped an area including the whole of Norway, but showing only minor German and Polish coastal strips that do not correspond to administrative units; and excluding not only Russian littoral territories, but also a sort of corridor along the Lithuanian-Polish border that links the Kaliningrad area to mainland Russia.⁹⁰ On the one hand, the EUSBSR stipulated the existence of a specific “EU Baltic Sea Region” with nearly 85 million inhabitants, excluding the St. Petersburg area and the enclave of Kaliningrad, which is surrounded by EU territory.⁹¹ (The number is not explained, but is evidently the aggregate of all EU littoral states with the exception of Germany, which accounts for the remaining approximately 20 million people. As the population of the German territory covered by the Baltic Sea Interreg programs amounts to less than 14 million and there is no obvious extension of a German Baltic Sea space, this means that the proposed boundaries in Germany are vague.)⁹²

On the other hand, the EUSBSR deploys a deliberately functional approach to space. Its constitutive document states:

The strategy covers the macro-region around the Baltic Sea. The extent depends on the topic: for example on economic issues it would involve all the countries in the region, on water quality issues it would involve the whole catchment area, etc. Overall, it concerns the eight Member States bordering the Baltic Sea. Close cooperation between the EU and Russia is also necessary in order to tackle jointly many of the regional challenges. The same need for constructive cooperation applies also to Norway and Belarus.⁹³

The EUSBSR currently focuses on environment, growth, and communication objectives; an earlier fourth pillar addressing safety and security has been subsumed under the environmental “Save the Sea” theme.⁹⁴ The strategy has been criticized for excessively relying on a sectoral approach and for its lack of a clear territorial perspective, as opposed to an alternative, more cohesive, area-based approach.⁹⁵ However, spatial variance is endemic to a strategy that is laid out as an efficiency-enhancing framework for aligning diverse regional programs and instruments—and must be so, because the three principle “nos” of the EU macro regional method have been inscribed

in this policy from the outset: “no new EU funds, no additional EU formal structures, and no new EU legislation”.⁹⁶ Against this backdrop, scholars have observed the strategy’s “double vision in which actors are induced to frame their activities in multiple spatial frames by attaching what could perhaps be called an ‘EUSBSR brand’ to their activities”. It remains unclear how such a polyphonic labelling exercise might be made consistent with the same academics’ claim that the EUSBSR gravitates towards a “singularized version” of the Baltic Sea region, with the European Commission serving as the “mouthpiece of the emerging ‘regional Leviathan’”.⁹⁷ Other scholars suggest there is an alternative between the EUSBSR as an EU-controlled umbrella for the “whole” Baltic Sea cooperation and “a European macro-region that principally continues to see itself as an area of cooperation in its own right and distinct from the EU”. This is an update of the juxtaposition of a Europe of concentric circles versus one of Olympic rings, a view that mistakes the plurality of regional arrangements for the sedimentation of a collective actor.⁹⁸

Yet there is an elephant in the room of the EUSBSR, namely Russia. The prospect of the EU policy construct of macro regional strategies is unclear—or even “doubtful”, as one researcher puts it.⁹⁹ In the Baltic Sea area, the two issues are, however, tightly intertwined: success will depend to a large extent on the kind of relations with Russia the EUSBSR will be able to draw on.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

In geographical literature, the Baltic Sea region serves as example of a new region that lacks a shared history and is instead a project of planners and policy-makers.¹⁰¹ The present inquiry leaves it to others to make sense of the frequently conflict-laden, but at times cooperative history of the Baltic Sea area (including the question of which quarters refuse to endorse the harmony of the Hansa era or of a particular *dominium maris baltici*).¹⁰² Moreover, it does not examine how local communities, administrative regions, islands, autonomous territories, and various civil society organizations position themselves in a Baltic Sea region that has emerged as a governmental enterprise across a variety of international bodies and policy programs. Particularly noteworthy in this process is the distinct trajectory of areal imaginaries of the Baltic Sea region from the VASAB concepts of spatial planning in the early 1990s, via the Interreg B schemes at the beginning of the new millennium, to the EUSBSR—the prototype of EU macroregional strategies.¹⁰³

The EU enlargements in 1995 with Finland and Sweden, and in 2004 with Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, have contributed considerably to the political integration of the Baltic Sea area. Since 2004, regional cooperation across the Baltic Sea is mainly an exogenously designed project based in EU headquarters in Brussels.¹⁰⁴ The recent conceptual move that carves out an “EU Baltic Sea region” is the consequence of the ambition of Brussels-conceived multilevel governance,

“THE BALTIC SEA REGION IN ITS EU VERSION IS THUS A TORSO WITH ITS HEAD DISCONNECTED IN BRUSSELS, AND SOME LIMBS CUT OFF.”

and the remaining inapproachability of parts of the larger area to the planners and policy-makers based there. The 2015 *State of the Region Report* suggests that regional ownership of the EUS-BSR vis-à-vis the European Commission has recently improved, and that the deterioration of relations with Russia has provided “a new impetus to integration within the rest of the Baltic Sea Region”.¹⁰⁵ However, a major driving force of cooperation across the Baltic Sea has been the attempt to administratively bridge spaces with disparities of socioeconomic development and political culture, rather than to consolidate an a priori homogeneous area. Leaving out the enclave of Kaliningrad and the other westernmost parts of Russia asserts a territorial shape with blind spots that have the potential to disrupt EU efforts. The Baltic Sea region in its EU version is thus a torso with its head disconnected in Brussels and some limbs cut off.

An extended regional interaction draws on traditional patterns of Nordic cooperation, bringing Norway and parts of the North Atlantic into the orbit of Baltic Sea cooperation. Moreover, a partial merger with Barents initiatives has added some remote areas of Russia. Although the resulting hybridization buttresses the relational interpretation of regions, there is a notable uneasiness, correlating with distance from the topographical sea space in applying the “Baltic Sea” label, and also a lack of political commitment. Participation in an extended region seems to be more attractive in talk shops like CBSS than in engaging workshops like HELCOM.

AS A SEMIENCLOSED sea, the Baltic forms the tangible system of a geographical neighborhood, shipping passages, and commons, as well as a distinct ecosystem, across both the sea space and the larger catchment area. As natural conditions make the Baltic Sea exceptionally vulnerable, protective measures are vital for industrial littoral societies. Thus, even if there were no shared history, there would remain a set of issues with incentives for multilateral cooperation that include Russian and other non-EU territories – issues which cannot be reduced to planning and policy-making alone. It is no coincidence that fishing resources and environmental protection were the first multilaterally addressed issues at a time when the Iron Curtain still divided the Baltic Sea. Although, or perhaps because, functional environmental cooperation is primarily a Western concern, it continues to be among the areas in which cross-regional partnerships work best. Russian priorities such as nuclear security and combating organized crime are other fields suitable for ongoing collaborative efforts.¹⁰⁶

The fact that the Immanuel Kant State University of Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg State University publish the open-access English-language journal *Baltic Region* (“committed to highlighting the topical issues of sustainable development [...], as well as the theoretical and methodological problems of transborder cooperation”) underscores the interest and identification with the region in Russian riparian areas.¹⁰⁷ A recent article in *Baltic Region* dealing with increasing tensions between Russia and the West argues that these matters are not endemic to the Baltic Sea region, and that the maintenance of good communication is in

the national interest.¹⁰⁸ Another contribution endorses the EUS-BSR as experimental and innovative, while depicting disregard for the role of Russia as a hampering factor. The authors call for reorientation along the lines of the Northern Dimension project and for an approach that treats the Baltic Sea region “as an indivisible whole” rather than as an administrative platform for a variety of partially applicable cooperation programs.¹⁰⁹

Although considerably vaguer in shape, the Baltic Sea region in many respects resembles the Barents region with which it is occasionally conjoined. This concerns the structure of the region: soft boundaries towards the outside (in all instances in which they do not coincide with national borders), an extension across the hard borders of nationstates, the Schengen frontier (unless one relies on the exclusive EU-based definition of the region), and the boundary of NATO. Other parallels are mutual concerns of stability and security, and still more significantly, improving economic networks and the competitiveness of the area, all major aims of region-building.¹¹⁰ At the same time, environmental concerns seem to have an over-arching bearing on both dimensions, if not indeed forming a third dimension in the Baltic Sea area.

The Baltic Sea region has been described as “a meeting-place for function and territory” where borders and space are dealt with flexibly.¹¹¹ At the same time, it serves as a floating signifier for simultaneously valid regional images and definitions emerging from different networks and from the implementation of various policy programs.¹¹² Thus the region is an ambiguous, multidimensional entity constructed on the basis of functional, relational, and administrative determinants. Distinct, sometimes interacting concepts of region-building and territoriality are at work in different contexts. However, while there have been manifold forces shaping the region, they have not been consistently strong. Baltic Sea integration lost momentum after the 2004 enlargement of the EU, and has continued to do so over the past decade with the increasing estrangement and eventual rift between Russia and the West.¹¹³ Deregionalizing tendencies have been apparent since then, and at the same time there have been new deals with contra tendencies, including the elevation of Russia’s position in the Northern Dimension and the region’s theoretical downsizing to the format of a workable governance unit in the EUSBSR.

A RECENT RESOLUTION by the BSPP calls for “further development of the structural dialogue and cooperation between each and every regional organization and format” in order to attain “a common Baltic cooperation space”.¹¹⁴ However, the duality of the Baltic Sea region as a forum for political rapprochement and solving overarching functional issues on the one hand, and for pragmatic EU policy making and implementation on the other, is structurally ingrained. Under the present circumstances it is unclear at what levels and to what extent relations across the reemerging divides that run through the Baltic Sea area can be maintained. The crisis in the Ukraine and rising military tension along the borders of Russia, including increasingly aggressive naval and air force encounters in the Baltic Sea area, have resulted

in the cancellation of high-level meetings with Russian government representatives and the curtailment of other diplomatic encounters. The mechanics of collaboration continue to work “on autopilot”.¹⁵ Regional scripts that have been active over the past decades have now been set aside in hibernation. ❌

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- 59 Lehti, “Baltic Europe,” 135, 138.
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- 61 Williams, *Zur Konstruktion einer Region*, 231; for the second session, see “Conference Resolution,” BSPC, accessed May 28, 2016, <http://www.bspc.net/file/show/197>; on the BSPC in general, see Kurunmäki, “The Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference and Democracy.”
- 62 BSPC website, various documents; see <http://www.bspc.net/>.
- 63 *Northern Dimension and the Oceans and Seas: The 15th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, Reykjavik, 4–5 September, 2006* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council, 2006), 6.
- 64 See Bernd Henningsen, “A Model Region: The Baltic Sea,” *Baltic Worlds* 1, no. 1 (2008); Christiansen, “Between ‘In’ and ‘Out’,” 194, 200; Schymik, “Networking Civil Society.” In order to minimize confusion, this article follows current EU nomenclature, according to which spaces like the Baltic Sea region are called macro-regions; earlier terminology spoke of mesoregions, while Europe was a macroregion; see, e.g., Christiansen, “A European Meso-Region?”
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- 66 *Baltic Sea Region Initiative: Communication from the Commission* (SEC/96/0608) (Brussels: European Commission, 1996).
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- 69 Michael Davis, “The European Union and the Baltic Sea Region: Problems and Prospects for Stability,” *NEBI Yearbook* 3 (2000): 218, 220.
- 70 See Williams, *The Baltic Sea Region*, 36.
- 71 See Nicola Catellani, *The EU’s Northern Dimension: Testing a New Approach to Neighbourhood Relations?* (Stockholm: Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2003), 24; see also David Arter, “Small State Influence Within the EU: The Case of Finland’s ‘Northern Dimension Initiative’,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 38 (2000): 682, 685–687; Hanna Ojanen, “The EU and Its ‘Northern Dimension’: An Actor in Search of a Policy, or a Policy in Search of an Actor?” *European Foreign Affairs Review* 5 (2000).
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- 77 Williams, *The Baltic Sea Region*, 37 (quotation there); Arter, “Small State Influence,” 678, 682–684; on the background of criticism towards the BSRI, see Erwan Lannon and Peter van Elsuwege, “The EU’s Northern Dimension and the EMP-ENP: Institutional Frameworks and Decision-Making Processes Compared,” in *The European Union and the Mediterranean: The Mediterranean’s European Challenge*, vol. 5, ed. Peter G. Xuereb (Valetta: University of Malta, 2004), 23–24.
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- 80 Michael Emerson, “Foreword,” in *The New Northern Dimension of the European Neighbourhood*, ed. Pami Aalto, Helge Blakkisrud and Hanna Smith (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2008), ii; on the partner-oriented approach, see Lannon and Elsuwege, “The EU’s Northern Dimension,” 25.
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- 87 Cf. “Report from the Commission [...] on the Implementation of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR),” COM(2011) 381 final (June 22, 2011), 4, 6, accessed May 28, 2016, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52011DC0381>.
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- 98 See Schymik and Krumrey, *EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region*, 4; for the juxtaposition: Moisiso, “Back to Baltoscandia,” 83–84.
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- 104 Henningsen, “A Model Region,” 30; Pami Aalto, “European Integration and the Declining Project of Building a Baltic Sea Region,” in *Perceptions of Loss, Decline and Doom in the Baltic Sea Region: Untergangsvorstellungen im Ostseeraum*, ed. Jan Hecker-Stampehl et al. (Berlin: Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2004), 170.
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- 108 Khudoley, “The Baltic Sea Region and Increasing International Tension,” 13.
- 109 Galina Gribanova and Yuri Kosov, “EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region: Challenges and Perspectives of International Cooperation,” *Baltic Region* 8, no. 2 (2016): 33.
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- 111 Christiansen, “Between ‘In’ and ‘Out,’” 206 (quotation there), 194.
- 112 On networks, see also Lehti, “Competing or Complementary Images,” 40.
- 113 Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, “Regionality Beyond Security? The Baltic Sea Region after Enlargement,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 39 (2004): 243; Khudoley, “The Baltic Sea Region and Increasing International Tension,” 5–6; Etzold and Opitz, “The Baltic Sea Region.”
- 114 *Baltic Sea Region: A Role Model for Innovation in Social and Healthcare: 24th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference* (Schwerin: Landtag, 2015), 96.
- 115 Ketels and Pedersen, *State of the Region Report 2015*, 4, 33.