

Baltic Sea Region – Myth or Reality?



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Since I study history, this work does not aim to present the best possible definition of the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). I am also not going to break up the 'fairytale of the BSR'. Restating Shinohara (1997, 30) my question here was not whether the BSR is vision or reality. It is a vision and at the same time, or perhaps because of this, it is a reality. So the question comes, what is the Baltic Sea Region and how does it function in reality?

The last fifteen years brought wide popularity to the concept of 'mental mapping' among intellectuals. Since the works by Tolman (1948), Downs and Stea (1977), and especially after Said (1979), historians have started to study different discursive practices, which aimed to create various schemes of geographical areas providing them with the fixed characteristics, including notions of 'imagined' or 'invented' into the titles of their books. The concept of the Baltic Sea Region is the typical example of such a construct of 'imagined community', having slowly taken root in general usage of intellectuals in the last years, without being exactly defined. As the Russian researcher Alexei Miller has pointed out, the possible reason for this may be "the dissatisfaction of historians with the national historical narratives, having dominated for a long time" (Miller 2002, 223); consequently, the aspiration for overcoming such a 'national scale' finds its expression in the appeal to the regional dimension.¹

¹ Miller points out two levels of this appeal: to the macro-regional – a history of Europe, and micro-regional – a history of Central, Central-Eastern, Southern-Eastern or Northern Europe.

Thus, what is in fact the Baltic Sea Region? Lehti tends to find the roots of the BSR idea's revival only in the 1980s, when the Iron Curtain, which divided the Baltic Sea area for almost half of the century, collapsed and the countries of the region managed successfully to cope with the legacy of the Cold War era. He states that "as a concept, the Baltic Sea area was introduced during the last few years of the 1980s into the speeches of a few politicians and academics as a new future option for the North to escape marginality and to control the disintegrating East" (Lehti 2005, 9).² The discussion had been started by the historians Männikö (Finland) and Zernack (Germany) at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, and was continued by Kirby and Klinge in the early 1990s (Lehti 2005, 12-13). As a result, a new notion – 'the Baltic world' – was introduced to describe the area,³ thereby adding a new, Northern, dimension to Europe's mental map.

As Tassinari underlined, "the study of regions in International Relations (IR) has yielded analytical works of considerable diversity... Hence, international regions can be defined according to different analytical criteria, and can be studied from numerous perspectives" (Tassinari 2004, 3).

First of all, the main criterion in defining the BSR as an integrated region is, undoubtedly, geography. The Baltic Sea, which is the "West Sea" (Läänemeri) for Estonians and the "East Sea" (Østersøen, Ostsee) for Danes and Germans respectively, clearly defines geographical borders of the area, embracing the states situated around it: Denmark, Sweden,

² At the same time Lehti notes that the BSR concept originates from interwar Estonia, where the notion of Baltoscandia was introduced by the local geographer E. Kant with the arguments for creating one political area of the one uniform geographical region consisting of the Baltic States, Finland and Scandinavia.

³ At the same time Lehti fairly states that Kirby was using also Northern Europe and Northern Periphery as synonyms for the BSR. Also interesting here could be the possible comparison between the emerging of the BSR idea and the idea of the Mediterranean world, put forward by Braudel in the 1940s (Braudel 1992).

Finland, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Germany.⁴ The Baltic Sea as a common drainage area, similar climate and weather conditions, the plains and lowlands combined with mountains in landscape – this is the set of common geographical factors, which influence the area. But since defining the region, as Matvejevic puts it, is not only about geography (Matvejevic 1999, 7-10), the sea does not provide us with an answer to the question where the BSR starts or ends. Therefore we need other important markers to help us define the BSR.

Hobsbawm once characterised history as the raw material for nationalist, ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies and compared its role to the one of poppies, the raw material for heroin (Hobsbawm 1997, 5). This striking metaphor can easily be applied in the case discussed, since historical past in all its aspects has become a keystone in 'creating' the BSR. Long tradition of multinational cooperation,⁵ permanent population migrations, common trade, cultural and religious exchange, strategic interests in the area, which led to the almost permanent struggle for dominance on the southern side of the Baltic – these are the main historical factors, which have been the source of the 'poppies' for the BSR 'builders'. History also provided them with brilliant examples of early attempts at interstate cooperation. The first powerful union in the region emerged in the thirteenth century: the Hanseatic League, which among others included Hamburg, Bremen, Riga and Tallinn, and dominated commerce on the North and Baltic Seas between 1250 and 1525. The second important example from the past was the Union of Kalmar (1397-1523) between Denmark, Norway, and Sweden-Finland. Both of them became symbols and images of interdependence, unity, political force and collective sense of belonging across the region, which are widely exploited in the area today.

⁴ For the full picture of the common geographical features of the BSR see Westin 2002.

⁵ Kirby once mentioned joint ship building as the bright example of the cooperation between the nations of the region, because it involved lots of people, who learned how to work together.

The nineteenth century together with the wind of nationalism brought the ideas of pan-Germanism and pan-Slavism into the Baltic, which, in turn, activated pan-Scandinavian movements. As Kilham puts it, "some of the liberal Swedes, echoing the national unification movements in Germany and Italy in the mid-1800s, hoped eventually to forge a united Nordic state. At that time, however, this romantic Scandinavism appears to have been largely a literary and academic movement with few roots in general population" (Kilham 1993, 19).⁶ According to his book, "the fading of pan-Scandinavism thought accelerated in 1864, when Sweden-Norway refused to come to the military aid of Denmark after it had been attacked by Prussia and Austria" (Kilham 1993, 26).⁷

In the twentieth century such previous history was overshadowed by the divisions of the Cold War, "to the extent that the Eastern countries, particularly the three Baltic countries and Poland, disappeared from the minds of Danes – and probably Swedes, too – who instead turned to the Nordic community" (Østergård 2006, 174). The main task for the Scandinavian countries during these years became to remain peaceful and keep a balance between the two world superpowers. At the same time, it seemed very important for the future that "whatever the terminology, whether a balance, equilibrium, process, or merely the 'Nordic' way, it is quite obvious that all of the Nordic states have, in fact, paid careful attention to the impact their actions in national security matters might

⁶ Kirby quotes a typical literary manifestation of this movement, an "Öresund", by C. W. Törnengsen (1873), which had Svea offering the hand of friendship to Dana, a handshake which resounded: "From the Belt's waves to Lapland's fells. Hail Scandinavia, threefold hail, United, strong and free!" (Kirby 1995, 123).

⁷ Østergård seems to be persuasive in the statement that "the structural weakness of Scandinavianism, however, was that Denmark wanted Scandinavian help against a threat from the uniting German state to the south, whereas Sweden wanted help against expansionist Russia to the east. These two interests were impossible to reconcile. As a matter of fact, Germany has always been perceived as a friend and ally by Sweden, while Denmark has been in alliance with or protected by Russia. It was therefore no big surprise that the fellow Scandinavians failed to bail Denmark out of the impasse she had manoeuvred herself into in 1864. Thus began a process of nation-building..." (Østergård 2006, 178-179).

have on their neighbours" (Kilham 1993, 3).⁸ On the other hand, "it has become popular to perceive the Nordic world as different from and morally superior to the rest of Europe. (...) According to this notion, *Norden* consisted of a family of small and homogeneous nation-states, while the other Baltic countries appeared to be so exotic that a Danish book about the Baltic states in 1977 was given the title 'Unknown neighbours'" (Østergård 2006, 174-75). Nevertheless, this is the possible explanation of the fact that although three of the Nordic countries have a tradition of symbolic monarchy and long histories of struggle for domination around the Sea, egalitarianism and a policy of non-violence have become two characteristic elements of political thought throughout the Baltic rim.

The Cold War situation was finally overcome with the entry of Finland and Sweden into the European Union in 1995 and the Northern Dimension Initiative from 1997. After Poland and the Baltic states joined the EU in 2004 the Baltic Sea has almost become an inland sea of the EU.

According to the modernist theories of nationalism, the most important component for creating a strong common identity feeling is a common culture (Gellner 1983). From this point of view, the BSR seems to be almost a monolithic cultural project, with special emphasis on the Lutheran church and Protestant culture. The only major cultural difference in the region is language: Finnish, Slavonic and German languages. But in the twenty first century this disparity has reduced as the result of the increased educational and research activities in the region.

As Musial states, "functional region-building within the scientific community, with a point of departure in the environment and nature protection, becomes a priority for some of the educators and cultural policy makers and a point of departure for building the region by

⁸ Besides, since World War I all the Scandinavian countries have become enthusiastic supporters of the League of Nations and then the United Nations, along with their own system of collective security.

educational means" (Musial 2002, 189-190). The author inclines to believe that the new regional identity has been seriously constructed and developed by cultural strategies and programmes, e. g. "The Baltic University Programme network", "The BaltSeaNet and the Baltic University Programme". Another important aspect, according to Musial, is that the authorities, by developing educational and research policies, "promote the physical mobility of learners and teachers, virtual mobility and the various uses of the new information and communication technologies ... which would turn the BRS into a learning region in which innovation in resources, the acceptance of common academic standards and dissemination of good practice in education will be realized in full" (Musial 2002, 197), and thus would lay the basis of the new BSR identity formation.

The last, but perhaps the most important, unifying component is the economy. Usually, while mentioning the BSR, one will state that this is the region that enjoys one of the biggest growth rates and highest living standard in Europe. But at the same time it is the economic sphere where the legacy of the Cold War period is still perceptible; in *stricto sensu* there are two groups of states in the area today: the first one – the group of high-income countries with long-standing market economies (Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Germany); and the second one – the group of middle or low-income countries with transitional economies (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia) (Paas 2005, 188). From this point of view, the integration process in the BSR really seems to be unique, because such difference only helps the newly independent states to study quickly how they can develop their own economies in the BSR framework. The most instructive example here is a comparative chart of the BSR economies' interdependence in trade, and even comparatively small figures for Russia and Germany should not mislead the reader, simply because of their largeness and orientation towards the world market:

Table: Interdependence in trade of BSR economies

Country	Percentage share of the BSR in imports	Percentage share of the BSR in exports
Denmark	47	43
Estonia	69	72
Finland	55	43
Germany	13	11
Latvia	66	64
Lithuania	68	53
Poland	46	43
Russia	31	22
Sweden	47	36

Source: International Monetary Fund Statistics, 2006.

Meanwhile, the BSR authorities can be proud of one economic project, which was considered a 'best practice' example for European regional cooperation at the end of the 1990s: the Øresund Region, which connected Denmark and Sweden, not only with the symbolic Øresund bridge but also with concrete and effective economic projects (Hospers, 2005).

As a result, the BSR today has different levels of interplay among various actors:

1. Cooperation among non-governmental organisations;
2. Sub-national cooperation (local governments around the Baltic Sea, e.g., the Union of the Baltic Cities);
3. Intergovernmental cooperation (e.g., Council of Baltic Sea States);
4. Supranational cooperation (United Nations Organisation, World Bank, European Bank of Reconstruction and Development programs).

To conclude, comparing the BSR with Central and Eastern Europe shows that the BSR's advantage is that it is not just an intellectual paper project, but supported by 'real' cooperation. Although the question of a common BSR identity is still open, the fact that the Baltic people cannot escape current trends towards interdependence leads one to predict that integration processes will be even closer in future.

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