

# Baltic Sea Strategy:

a Pilot Project for  
Macro-Regionalisation in the EU

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## **CREDITS**

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## Abbreviations

ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists Group
EFD	Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group
EPP	European People's Party
GREENS/EFA	European Greens—European Free Alliance
GUE/NGL	European United Left—Nordic Green Left
NI	Non inscrit
S&D	Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats

# 1 The Baltic Sea as a Region

To identify and circumscribe the Baltic Sea Region is part of an ongoing process of naming historical regions in Europe. Stefan Troebst sees a historical region as ‘a construction of a meso-region which over a long period of time is characterised by an individual cluster of social, economic, cultural and political structures and which is larger than a single state yet smaller than a continent “Scandinavia” or “the Balkans” being classical examples’ (Troebst 2003, 173).

Macro-regionalisation in its current form is a product of post-Cold War Europe. Its roots are in the 1990s and the reconstruction of Europe. Andrew Cottey identifies five European subregional groups all hosting a number of organisations. The subregional groups in Cottey’s definition are Northern Europe, Central Europe, the Balkans/Black Sea, the Mediterranean and the former Soviet Union (Cottey 2009, 5). When he focuses on groups that involve the Member States of the European Union (i.e., excluding the former Soviet Union), Cottey lists 15 macro-regions—or sub regions in his account.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously this is not all. At least two more macro-regional entities should be added. The Atlantic Arctic Region is determined to comprise a macro-region. The North Sea

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<sup>1</sup> Cottey’s term ‘sub-regional’ is equivalent to ‘macro-region’, used in this paper. He defines sub-region as follows: ‘the term sub-region refers to geographical-political spaces which are a sub-set of a larger regional space’ (Cottey 2009, 5). The approach reflects a top-down regionalisation: subsets of large regional spaces. This paper subscribes to macro-regionalisation.

Commission, founded in 1989, should be added to the list as well. The institutionalisation of the Alpine Region is also in progress. Defining a macro-region is, however, a complicated matter. The definition given in the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea (Baltic Sea Strategy) is definitely not the last word. Discussion, academic and political, is in its early stage as to the most suitable analytical definition for describing and understanding macro-regionalisation in its current form.

The Baltic Sea Region is the first macro-region recognised by the European Union. The European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region is the first internal macro-regional strategy of the Union. The region is a pilot project for setting an example and offering best/worst practices to other macro-regions in the making.

Since the strategy is in the early stages of implementation, the region now needs discussion and ideas on how it will be implemented and by whom; or which actors, and in what kinds of combinations, will take responsibility and provide impetus for its accomplishment. Questions of accountability and forms of participation are still undecided. Elaboration is also needed on how to build a proper institutional framework for implementing the strategy.

The Baltic Sea Strategy and the Action Plan were drafted in extremely challenging times. The global financial crisis hit the region forcefully. Until the outburst of the global crisis the Baltic Sea Region was one of the fastest growing economic areas in Europe.

The 2008 competitiveness report stated that the Baltic Sea Region 'truly competes as a knowledge-driven economy, with strengths in education, technology, innovative capacity,

and business sophistication. But this description again fits best for the Nordic countries with other parts of the Region providing variations of the underlying themes of strong skills' (Ketels 2008, 5).

During the months in which the strategy was drafted, the Baltic Sea Region deteriorated into crisis. Growth figures that showed upward trends during the last 10 years pointed sharply down by the time of the adoption of the strategy. A peculiar challenge therefore is that the Baltic Sea Region has to face the future from a perspective of declining economic growth, which in some countries of the region means considerable adjustment. The inputs to the strategy were made from a perspective of continuous economic growth. The test of its added value will be whether it can contribute to the economic reconstruction of the region.

The Baltic Sea Region was divided by the Cold War for almost 45 years. Regionalisation was not possible as a way to approach the region as a whole. Regional identity was not able to emerge. At the same time, the Cold War divisions, although visible in the region, never developed into open military confrontation. This fact is a positive precondition for future regionalisation.

During the Cold War, regionalisation was the result of mainly Nordic cooperation. Nordic regionalisation established the basis for 'Norden' to become a distinct unit with a Nordic identity. Civil societies and a common heritage established the foundations for Nordic cooperation. 'Norden' is not only a complex of common identities and a shared mental map, but also that of a high degree of institutionalised interaction, at state level as well as at the level of civil societies (Götz 2003, 238).

The collapse of the Cold War opened a window of opportunity for regionalisation in the region. The Nordic countries seized the opportunity. They offered traditional forms of cooperation and assistance for economic reforms and democratisation. The opening of the accession process to the Baltic countries marked a shift in the Nordic approach. The accession period called for a process of socialisation for the applicant countries.

Socialisation was made possible because of the existing liberal-democratic value base that the accession countries shared before the Second World War. The new Member States had maintained to a great extent their cultural ties with Western Europe. This greatly helped their accession to be seen as a 'return to Europe'. The Nordic countries played an important role in this.

In addition to government contacts and programmes, close cooperation between subnational actors across the borders is a particular Nordic element. In Norden, local authorities (cities and municipalities) enjoy a high level of autonomy. This has encouraged the establishment of an extensive twin-city network in the region. Civil society organisations took a very active role as well during the 1990s. All this is important background for implementing the Baltic Sea Strategy.

## 2 Elements of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

Macro-regionalisation in the European Union as it appears today emerged quite unexpectedly and is linked to the enlargement of the European Union. The 2004 enlargement doubled the number of Member States in the region. The three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and Poland deeply shaped the landscape of the region and in a wide variety of ways. The three Baltic states entered the European Union as former Republics of the Soviet Union, which gave a special flavour to their accession. They had to be reconstructed as sovereign states after a break of over 50 years in their experience of state sovereignty.

The initiative for Baltic Sea regionalisation came from the European Parliament. The 'European Parliament Resolution on the Baltic Sea Region Strategy for the Northern Dimension' was adopted in 2006. Only three years later the European Council adopted the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea. It is important to acknowledge the fact that the original initiative was from the European Parliament through the 'Baltic Europe' Intergroup, which played an important role in promoting the idea. The Parliament was the initiator.

The European Parliament Resolution of 2006 urged the Commission 'to come up with a proposal for an EU Baltic Sea Strategy in order to reinforce the internal pillar of the Northern Dimension, cover horizontally different aspects of regional cooperation, promote synergies and avoid overlapping between different regional bodies and organisations'. The resolution also invited 'the Commission and the member states to adjust the responsibilities of their administrations in order for them to be able to employ a horizontal approach when devising and implementing the Northern Dimension policy' (European Parliament 2006).

The resolution saw the strategy as reinforcing 'the internal pillar of the Northern Dimension'. The Northern Dimension policy was elaborated in 1999 as a European Union policy. From the beginning, Norway, Iceland and Russia have participated in the policy as non-EU countries. Its geographic focus has been and still is on northwest Russia, Kaliningrad and the Barents Sea as well as on the Arctic and sub-Arctic areas. The main objectives of the policy are to provide a common framework for the promotion of dialogue and concrete cooperation, to strengthen stability and well-being, to intensify economic cooperation and to promote economic integration, competitiveness and sustainable development in Northern Europe.

The resolution emphasises the need for a horizontal dimension to be included in the Baltic Sea Strategy. It notes a lack of synergy and an overlap among different regional bodies and organisations. It also refers to adjusting the responsibilities of Member States in the region to make them better able to apply horizontal measures. Emphasis on horizontal issues is a very valuable notion which is, however, rather marginally reflected in the final strategy documents.

Two years later, in December 2007, the European Council mandated the Commission to draft a strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. The mandate reads as follows:

Without prejudice to the integrated maritime policy, the European Council invites the Commission to present an EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region at the latest by June 2009. This strategy should inter alia help to address the urgent environmental challenges related to the Baltic Sea. The Northern Dimension framework provides the basis for the external aspects of cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. (Council of the European Union 2008)

Two observations are worth noting. First, the mandate gives priority 'to urgent environmental challenges related to the Baltic Sea.' This priority reflects the factual situation. One expert report after another has highlighted the alarming environmental deterioration of the Sea. Public consciousness and awareness is high and increasingly concerned. Pressure on the authorities to take action is mounting. The perception that there are 'urgent environmental challenges related to the Baltic Sea' stems both from the actual state of the environment as well as from public pressure.

However, the final strategy gives much attention to the environmental dimension at the expense of economic and social topics. Stressing the urgency of addressing the environmental deterioration has guided the work of the Commission at the expense of other topical issues like the challenges of restructuring the economy of the Baltic Sea region.

Environmental deterioration has dominated the regional agenda since the 1970s. It has been the core focus of region building in the Baltic Sea Region. A general understanding and a relatively naive but well-meaning expectation has been

that environmental challenges would unite the region and consequently have spillover effects in other policy areas such as the economy, for instance.

At the outset the model followed the idea of functional integration in the early EEC/EU. The key motivation in establishing the EEC was enhancing well-being through trade liberalisation. Trade liberalisation proved to be the core factor that created spillover effects and helped to produce the current European Union. The idea reflects the neofunctionalist tradition or the classical Monnet method of building institutionalised cooperation in areas where common interests are obvious, public opinion is supportive and spillover effects are expected.

Intergovernmental cooperation in the environmental sector was institutionalised as early as 1974 by the establishment of the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM). Its membership includes all of the coastal states and, since 2000, the European Community. HELCOM has produced an impressive number of declarations, resolutions as well as action plans and guidelines. The problem lies, however, in their implementation or, rather, the lack of implementation. The growing and already existing high-level public concern about the state of the environment of the Baltic Sea has not translated into policy decisions, nor have there been any spillover effects.

One explanation might be the fact that a key precondition of successful regional integration, the existence of pluralistic democratic societies, did not materialise in the region until the end of the Cold War. Pluralistic civil society structures are not yet fully functional in many former socialist societies even 20 years after the end of the Cold War (Johansson-Nogués 2009, 5).

The Northern Dimension framework is another focal point of the European Council's mandate to the Commission. The Council's understanding of the place of the Northern Dimension is different from that in the resolution of the European Parliament. The Parliament identifies the strategy as an 'internal pillar of the Northern Dimension' while the mandate sees it as an 'external dimension of the Baltic Sea Strategy'. The Council's declaration on the strategy of 26 October 2009, on the eve of the European Council decision, describes the place of the Northern Dimension in the following words: 'this cooperation could be pursued, notably but not exclusively, in the context of the Northern Dimension which provides a functioning format for an enhanced cooperation in the region' (Council of the European Union 2009b).

The final European Council decision of October 2009 does not refer to the Northern Dimension at all. Instead the Presidency Conclusions make reference to the possible contributions of the strategy 'to the economic success of the region and to its social and territorial cohesion, as well as to the competitiveness of the EU' (Council of the European Union 2009a). This is a reflection of the deterioration of the economic conditions of the region.

The strategy itself consists of two main documents: the Communication of the European Commission concerning the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (CEC 2009d) and an Action Plan (CEC 2009a). The Communication presents the aims and priorities while the Action Plan offers a number of concrete proposals and a list of projects of high significance.

The Communication lists four priority areas:

- enabling a sustainable environment;
- enhancing the region's prosperity;
- increasing accessibility and attractiveness;
- ensuring safety and security in the region.

The four priority areas, or the four pillars, are divided into 15 project areas. Each of them contains a number of concrete projects, or 'flagships'. The initial Action Plan lists 78 flagships. Each project area has a lead partner (or partners) responsible for organising the implementation. The strategy rests on existing instruments already offered by the European Union. It offers no new money to the region for implementation and employs the doctrine of no new institutions.

This makes the implementation of the strategy a challenging issue. The implementation depends on the actors in the region. The Member States of the region *must* show commitment and take responsibility. But the question remains as to how this can be done.

The strategy documents offer a definition for the Balti Sea macro-region:

a territorial entity linked by the Baltic Sea that includes entire Member States, parts of Member States and parts of third countries. The Baltic Sea Region is a good example of a macro-region—an area covering a number of administrative regions but with sufficient issues in common to justify a single strategic approach. (CEC 2009d, 5)

The definition draws attention to several issues. First, developing the macro-region is an internal strategy of the European Union. It is a European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. But the macro-region is not a region of Member States only: it covers a number of administrative regions and parts of third countries. It is somewhat unclear what this means. Reference to administrative regions opens the door for administrative regions as competent actors in the macro-region. In a similar way the wording is very unclear concerning the 'parts of third countries.' Is this an invitation to those parts to become partners in the strategy, or is it just recognition of the facts on the ground?

It is even more difficult to come to any conclusions on what 'sufficient issues in common' actually means and what is the measure of 'sufficient' that 'justifies' a single strategic approach. Many questions remain and need to be tested. 'Sufficient', for instance, may refer both to the number of issues and to the weightiness of the issues. Can a macro-strategy be based only on one issue provided it has sufficient weight and, vice versa, can a macro-region meet the sufficiency criterion by the sheer number of issues without measuring their weight? A balance between weight and numbers most likely must be established. It is equally important to ask who will take the final decision on an issue. In the end the question arises: should new institutionalisation of some kind be accepted after all?

## 3 The Baltic Sea Region -a Pilot Project for Macro-Regionalisation?

The Council of the European Union Decision 13744/09 (Council of the European Union 2009b) recognises the potential of the macro-regional strategy to contribute to the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the EU. The decision sees macro-regionalisation as an instrument for achieving EU objectives, in particular the Lisbon agenda, the European Recovery Plan and responses to other challenges the European Union is facing.

A remarkable widening of the scope of the Baltic Sea Strategy from 'urgent environmental challenges related to the Baltic Sea' to a wider range of issues took place in the final stages of drafting and adopting the strategy. The strategy is an instrument for enhancing the Baltic Sea Region on a wider range of issues and also as a model for future macro-regionalisation. 'The European Council calls upon all relevant actors to act speedily and ensure full implementation of the Strategy, *which could constitute an example of a macro-regional strategy*' (Council of the European Union 2009a, 35–6).

The pilot region dimension is evident. Adopting the strategy is both a challenge and an opportunity for the Baltic Sea Region. The European Commission is already drafting similar strategy documents for the Danube Region. The Adriatic Region seems to be headed in the same direction. The Atlantic Arc Commission, a network linking coastal regions from Portugal to Ireland and Scotland, is increasingly

devoting attention to the topic. The Mediterranean Region has high-level ambitions of regionalisation as well. Most recently, the search for a strategy for North Sea regionalisation has surfaced.

Does the Baltic Sea Strategy provide a model for other possible macro-regions; that is, is the experience gained transferable? If such an option emerges, an attractive window of opportunity to influence European politics would be opened for the Baltic Sea Region. The next question is whether the region is able and/or willing to seize the opportunity.

The recent enlargement has motivated, directly or indirectly, similar regionalisation efforts in other parts of Europe. Since the 1995 enlargement, the number of Member States has almost doubled, from 15 to 27. The process of enlargement is expected to continue in the future as well. The increase in the number of Member States increases the heterogeneity of the Union in many ways. Geographical closeness will become an ever more important element of the integration process. One is tempted to see macro-regionalisation as a growing trend and as an answer to challenges created by enlargement.

If regionalisation in the 1990s was seen as a part of reorganising post-Cold War Europe, it is today and will be even more in the future a version of differentiated integration on a territorial basis. Regionalisation as a form of differentiation stems from the simple fact that Member States geographically close to each other share common histories, common values and common interests on a variety of issues. Commonalities encourage regionalisation. Path dependency works in the coordination of policies. Mutually satisfying experiences from coordination in one sector

encourage the same states to engage in cooperation on other issues as well.

A long-lasting political impasse in institutional reform since the failure of the Constitutional Treaty has contributed to the emergence of a differentiated integration model. 'In the lack of comprehensive reform package available, the better alternative to status quo is an ad hoc series of subgroups of EU Member States moving ahead in particular policy areas,' argues Jan-Emmanuel de Neve, who provocatively calls the European Union a 'European Onion' (de Neve 2007, 508–9). The notion of differentiated integration or subgroup cooperation (a 'multi-speed Europe') has been on the agenda for years. It has also been recognised in Treaty reforms since the Amsterdam Treaty as a means of enhanced integration. The provision has remained as a dead letter.

Macro-regionalisation challenges the usual approach to discussing flexible integration. Often the models of flexibility are presented in terms of a multi-speed Europe, concentric circles and enhanced terms of cooperation. The overall idea of differentiation is that Member States consider closer cooperation between like-minded partners as a viable option. They practise it either within the Treaty framework (EMU, early Schengen) or as intergovernmental cooperation that may be transformed into Community policy over time (Schengen, Prüm Convention, Common Foreign and Security Policy).

Important choices in region building are deciding who and what belongs to a given region, who are the actors of that certain region and which policy issues should be included in the sphere of regional cooperation. Political decisions and political actors define and then nurture regions, deciding

who and what belongs to a certain region and who or what is left outside. Regions are produced through path-dependent political projects that aim at region building.

Region building unavoidably has a dimension of realpolitik. States enter into cooperation with other states in the region in order to achieve mutual benefits that they would not achieve by operating unilaterally. Mutual cooperation needs coordination, which often leads to common institutions and reciprocity in the conduct of mutual relations.

Enhancing functional spillover was for decades the foundation of European integration. The experience gained from the foundational period of European integration teaches that institutionalisation follows spillover in order to maintain the achievements and to secure the ongoing advance of the process. Regionalisation as a path-dependent process calls for institutionalisation to secure its achievements. Institutionalisation of a kind has surfaced in the Baltic Sea Region. If the 'no new institutions' approach remains in place, the need to reform and redesign existing institutions will become crucial.

The implementation procedure written into the strategy reflects the multi-level governance approach. It is based on the Community Method, where the Commission has the role of initiator and the European Council takes the policy decisions. The third dimension, 'implementation on the ground', is more or less an open issue. The Commission Staff Working Document on the impact assessment recognises this in the following words: 'The key problem in the region is not a lack of existing initiatives or governance structures. It is rather the failure of largely fragmented existing governance structures to provide a sufficiently robust framework in which the priority issues of the BSR can

be addressed in an integrated manner, which addresses potential policy conflicts and trade-offs between sectors' (CEC 2009c, 3).

The formulation of policy is in the hands of the European Council. The European Council and/or General Affairs Council take the major policy decisions at the initiative of the Commission, whereas actions are taken at the initiative of the European Commission. The task of the European Commission is to propose 'periodic reports and proposals for recommendations from the Commission to the Council. The European Council will be updated regularly on the progress of the strategy' (CEC 2009d, 10). The full Council should undertake the review of the progress, not just the eight Member States of the region.

The Commission is in the key position with respect to implementation. It has the task of 'co-ordination, monitoring, reporting, facilitation of the implementation and follow-up'. It should carry out these tasks in partnership with stakeholders in the region through 'regular progress reports, and use its power of initiative to make proposals for adaptation of the strategy and action plan whenever these are required' (CEC 2009d, 10).

'Partners already active in the region' make up another key set of actors. They have the responsibility for the 'implementation on the ground'. The Communication is not very precise here. It speaks of 'partnership with the other institutions, Member States and regions, international financing institutions, transnational programming bodies and intergovernmental organizations'. It names HELCOM as a particular intergovernmental institution. The aim is to identify coordinating bodies 'at the level of priority areas and lead partners for flagship projects' (CEC 2009d, 10–11).

The Communication does not propose structures or instruments for implementation, nor does any other document. The Communication promises that ‘there will be an annual forum to bring together partners concerned with different aspects of the strategy, including from interested third countries, to review and discuss the progress of the strategy and to make recommendations on implementation’ (CEC 2009d, 11). The European Commission has the key role. It proposes ‘periodic reports and proposals for recommendations from the Commission to the Council. The European Council will be updated regularly on the progress of the strategy’ (CEC 2009d, 10). The European Council and/or General Affairs Council shall take the major policy decisions on the initiative of the Commission.

The question of stakeholder involvement is recognised as a major challenge on many occasions in the documents associated with the Communication. The ‘partners in the region’ have shown considerable interest in the strategy work. Public consultation attracted interest from 109 stakeholders. These included all eight Member States from the region and three non-Member States (Russia, Norway and Belarus). Also, 48 intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations presented their views. In addition, 31 regional and local authorities and 19 representatives from the private sector, including two individuals, contributed to the consultation process (CEC 2009b, 5).

For a successful implementation of the Baltic Sea Strategy, the governance structure needs to be modified to meet the realities. One reality is that the region hosts considerable complexity. This is a challenge to implementation. But the complexity of the situation is not only due to local

circumstance. The European Union adds complexity of its own through the strategy. It was prepared in consultation with the Directorate General for Regional Policy (DG Regio) having the coordinating mandate.

A fundamental complexity is due to different competencies of the European Union in various policy domains. Competencies vary by sector—decision-making procedures in different domains are diverse. Some of the priority areas and flagships are governed by hard law, others are under soft law. The competence issue is not made easier by the fact that the implementation started simultaneously with the early steps of implementing the Lisbon Treaty.

In addition, the Baltic Sea Strategy comes into force in the midst of the life cycle of a budget framework. From the perspective of the partners in the region, the complexity of the European Union is a real challenge. New challenges, such as the Europe 2020 project, further complicate the situation.

But the complexity at the level of actors in the region is also considerable. The partners in the region have a variety of competencies: there are governments, regional authorities, cities, civil society organisations and private actors. The region is to some extent based on ‘network governance’: a set of actors, rules and transactions. The emergence of new actors challenges the existing governance patterns by providing new resources, adding flexibility and publicity, but at the same time demanding participation and influence. There is a need for incorporating new actors into the governance of the Baltic Sea Region.

The dynamism of governance stems primarily from the fact that the competencies and functions of the various levels

have not been finally laid down and perhaps never will be. Adherents of the multi-level governance approach concede that they do not have particular expectations of the dynamics of the European system beyond the notion that the boundaries between various levels of governance will become increasingly less clear.

The concept of multi-level governance, a dominant doctrine today, suggests that governments are not the only key actors that matter. The process of governing encompasses a multiplicity of political, legal, social and executive actors that operate along and across various levels of authority (regional, national and supranational). Multidimensionality is an essential feature of European Union governance in general.

Multi-level governance means by definition ‘relationships between, and the interdependence of, governments and non-governmental organisations and agencies. This approach seeks to locate the formal institutions of government alongside, but also within, more complex forms of networked governance.’ The concept rests on an implicit hierarchy of level and actors.

## 4 Governance through a Political Space?

If the region hopes to meet the challenges of the future—addressing environment problems, sustaining economic growth, solving the energy demands and meeting the security challenges, both national and individual—emphasis on political structures and policy commitments is needed. The question is how this can be done.

Implementation should be seen as a delivery chain: commitment—leadership—ownership. Successful implementation requires first a strong political commitment. Formally the commitment is the responsibility of, and should be taken by, the states. This was done with the adoption of the strategy documents in October 2009. But commitment goes beyond the formal decision. The Action Plan notes that the coordination of each priority area ‘should normally be allocated to a Member State which would work on its implementation, in close contact with the Commission, with all stakeholders involved’ (CEC 2009d, 3).

The original distribution of allocation followed this principle. Of the 15 priority areas, 13 were allocated to states, either individually or to a group of states. Only one area—‘To maintain and reinforce attractiveness of the Baltic Sea in particular through education, tourism and health’ (CEC 2009d, 53) was allocated jointly to two non-state actors, to the State of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and to the Northern Dimension Partnership.

By definition political commitment is made by political leaders, to use their power, influence and personal involvement to

ensure visibility, leadership, resources and political support. The definition of political commitment stresses the dedication of political leaders and their leadership. But politics is not territorial any more. Nation states and boundaries have lost their primacy and so the idea of political commitment by leaders has lost much of its relevance.

Political commitment is the key challenge of the Baltic Sea as a European Region. The Baltic Sea Strategy as it is seen today in the Action Plan cannot reach its aims without strong political commitment from the actors, in particular from the governments in the region. Member States are the key actors, but the question is whether they will be committed to anything other than 'the Christmas tree'. Does commitment end when one gets one's favourite projects onto the programme?

Setting a common agenda calls for leadership. Commitment and leadership go hand in hand. Among the key challenges is who or which institutions shall assume the role of leadership and are able to provide it. Leadership remains with the governments. Instead of asking who will take leadership, we should ask who will take ownership. Ownership of the Baltic Sea Strategy means a willing assumption of responsibility for an agreed policy by stakeholders.

The Baltic Sea Region should be seen as a political space well suited to solving the many challenges that the region faces. An innovative look at the convergence of global trends, statehood and local pressures is needed. Thinking of the Baltic Sea as a political space would help to increase the commitment of governments and political forces to Baltic Sea issues.

The concept of a political space would invite the political forces to enhance trans-boundary cooperation. Political spaces are 'social spaces wherein actors meet to make,

apply, interpret and enforce rules; they are thus sites of collective governance.’ Political space is ‘an action arena’ where ‘skilled actors’ try to ‘identify the specific structure of their interactions’ (Stone Sweet, Sandholtz and Fligstein 2001, 11). Who are the ‘skilled actors’? They are not only states and governments. They are also political forces, companies, private interests, civil society actors, subnational regions and cities. This perspective is available to any type of actor making and applying any type of rule to a political order.

A political space does not operate without institutions. This view contradicts the European Commission doctrine in the Baltic Sea Strategy of ‘no new institutions’. But institutions need not be formal or state organisations. Institutions are also ‘socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels’ (Helmke and Levitsky 2003, 9).

Institutions rely on networks, agreements, rules of behaviour, reciprocity and mutual commitments. The 1990s saw a mushrooming of organisations and networks, public and private, whose main purpose was the socialisation of the new market economies into Western European structures and, indeed, into EU membership. Many of those institutions still exist, but too many of them lack a clear mission. Much of the existing institutional network from the 1990s has deteriorated or been made obsolete by events. Political space calls for new forms of governance. The traditional model of governance through states must be fused with the structures of the transnational action arena into a new form of regional governance.

Traditional civil society networks and the activities of subnational entities have been followed by the increasing participation of private-interest actors. An obvious

explanation for the entry of private interests into the new governance is that the enlargement of 2004 made the Baltic Sea area an economic region. Internal market regulations now covered the region and the need for internationalisation of business activities became manifest. Private companies and business organisations have contributed considerably to the region building.

## 5 Three Levels of Political Space

### Intergovernmental platforms: a lack of political commitment?

The Baltic Sea political space has a three-level system of governance. At the top are intergovernmental organisations. This level consists of three sets of governmental organisations, each having a parliamentary counterpart.

Of these three sets, the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) is the only all-region set. The CBSS was established in 1990 for the purpose of intergovernmental cooperation. It has 11 states and the European Commission as members. The value of the CBSS is in the fact that it provides a platform where the EU, the eight Member States of the EU and two other Baltic Sea countries (Norway and Russia) plus Iceland meet.

Region-wide parliamentary cooperation began in 1991 with the first BSPC, a parliamentary body of the CBSS. The BSPC has not, however, developed into a politically meaningful body for political debates. Its main objective is to strengthen the common identity of the Baltic Sea Region through close cooperation between national and regional parliaments. The BSPC also declares its aim to be initiating and guiding political activities in the region and further regional cooperation, especially within the framework of the Council of the Baltic Sea States. So far these aims have not yielded practical results in line with the interests of its members. At the same time, the BSPC has the potential to develop into a serious forum for political debate.

Most existing Nordic institutions were founded in the early 1950s. The first common institution was the Nordic Council, established in 1952. As a forum of parliamentarians it works through parliamentary delegations from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, and the three autonomous territories of Åland, Faroe Islands and Greenland.

The Nordic Council's intergovernmental partner, the Nordic Council of Ministers, was established in 1971. The Council of Ministers meets from one to five times a year. The chairs of the Council of Ministers and the Committees of Senior Officials rotate annually among the countries. Currently 43 Nordic institutions and projects in different fields are supported financially by all the Nordic countries. Their activities are financed mainly through the budget of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The restored independence of the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) has shaped the region's political environment. The unwillingness of Norden to open its institutions to the newly independent Baltic countries forced

them towards regionalisation of their own. The Baltic countries created two main common institutions: the Baltic Assembly (BA) and the Baltic Council of Ministers (BCM). The first is an inter-parliamentary assembly: the second constitutes the executive authority.

Baltic trilateral cooperation is cooperation among three small nation states which share similar challenges. The main value of the BA lies in the opportunity it provides for parliamentarians of the Baltic states to come together and to discuss problems and issues of mutual interest. Although decisions made by the Baltic Assembly are only advisory in nature, they urge national parliaments and the BCM to coordinate actions and to solve the problems on parliamentary and governmental levels.

The challenge of the three state-related institutions is to make weakly empowered Baltic Sea institutions into effective instruments of agenda setting and policy implementation. However, they are to a great extent prisoners of their past. The structure of the CBSS was created to contribute to the adaptation of the region to the post-Cold War challenges. The Nordic institutions have had as their priority enhancing Nordic cooperation and facilitating the Nordic model. The Baltic institutions were established to help the Baltic states adapt for their 'return to Europe'. Reforms of and adjustments to existing institutions are needed in order to make them valuable institutions in the implementation of the Baltic Sea Strategy.

The CBSS ministerial meetings are at first glance proper platforms for being the voice of the Region. But the CBSS meetings are attended by ministers from three non-EU member states as well. This prevents the CBSS from becoming the right institution for discussion among the eight EU Member States that belong to the CBSS. Through the membership of the European Commission the CBSS has a

European Union dimension. The membership of the Commission ensures the presence of the European Union in the region, but not, however, the other way round. The Commission may through this framework become acquainted with Baltic views, but the body does not perform the function of influencing EU decisions.

Government consultation outside the CBSS and the Nordic and Baltic institutions occurs in two combinations and at two levels. The 6+2 combination (Nordic–Baltic plus Germany and Poland) practises coordination at the regional level. The combination operates normally twice per year at the level of European Directors of Foreign Ministries. The combination has recently started to meet occasionally in Brussels as well at the level of Deputy Permanent Representatives. Consultation remains at the level of information exchange. The meetings are built around major topics on the agenda of the European Union. They do not aim to outline common policies or common political lines. Nor are they a platform for discussions on the Baltic Sea Strategy.

The challenge is to get Poland and Germany to see their ‘Baltic Sea-ness’. The region does not have the same priority for Germany and Poland that it has for small and medium-sized Member States. Germany and Poland place the Baltic Sea Region into the wider framework of their national interests. In their multi-dimensional territorial agenda the Baltic Sea is just one element. They evaluate their Baltic Sea-ness from a perspective of interests and define their commitment by the added value that the Baltic Sea can bring to them.

Another, politically more meaningful combination of consultations is the NB6. NB6 follows the tradition of the 3+3 formula that prevailed until recently as an acronym for Nordic–Baltic consultation. The NB6 occurs in Brussels and mostly at

the level of ministries. In practice the ministers in the NB6 combination meet before the General Affairs and Foreign Ministers meeting. In a similar way, the Heads of States meet in connection with European Council meetings. Other Ministers (in energy, environment and transportation in particular) assemble as well before the Council meetings or at least those of the Presidency.

Permanent representatives also have meetings at the NB6 combination a few times a year. The NB6 gatherings are informal and connected to the agenda of meetings they are attached to. The combination has a tradition of several years as a 3+3 setup. The main importance of these consultations is the exchange of information. Their level of ambition is low and they are practical by nature. But the existence of the tradition would make them suitable for more demanding coordination as well. In their current form the meetings have no mandate to go beyond the exchange of information mainly on the EU agenda.

For the implementation of the Baltic Sea Strategy the level 1 institutions do not provide added value. The strategy has no role or at best only a marginal one in coordination. This derives from the fact that the implementation is left to national administrations. Baltic Sea governments have nominated national coordinators for monitoring implementation. Senior officials, as they are called, have regular meetings but their mandate does not extend to policymaking.

### **Can political forces push for the commitment?**

The European political space consisting of national political systems and the EU political system would offer a good platform for the Baltic Sea Region to exercise political

influence and to set the political agenda for the region. But instruments for political consultation are weak, and even the few existing ones give the Baltic Sea Strategy no priority at all or low preference.

An unexploited possibility for strengthening the voice of the region and improving agenda setting could be intensified cooperation among the parties across the borders. It is logical to assume that parties that collaborate at the level of European Parliament would find it reasonable to collaborate at the level of the Baltic Sea Region as well. Party cooperation takes place at the level of Norden to some extent and bilateral contacts exist between the national parties. But a common Baltic Sea agenda of parties does not exist.

By the time implementation of the Baltic Sea Strategy got underway, the region was dominated, at the level of governments, by the centre-right. The region is governed by coalition governments in which the European People's Party (EPP) and the Alliance of Liberal Democrats in Europe (ALDE) are dominant partners. Five of the eight Member States have governments with a Prime Minister from the EPP family (Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden) while three have a Prime Minister from the ALDE family (Denmark, Finland and Estonia). One could expect that policy coordination among the governments would be rather natural and obvious. In a similar way the political background of the members of the Commission from the eight Member States reflects the relative strength of the various political forces.

There is not, however, regular coordination of policies among the parties inside the European party families in the framework of the Baltic Sea. A Baltic Sea network inside the party families would be an improvement.

There does exist a platform for political agenda making, the BSPC. The BSPC has not, however, been able to develop into a politically meaningful body of political debates. It lacks a political agenda of its own.

**Table 1: The political power of the Baltic Sea Region in the European Parliament**

	EPP	S&D	ALDE	Greens/ EFA	ECR	GUE/ NGL	EFD	NI	TOTAL
FIN	4	2	4	2	-	-	1	-	13
SWE	5	5	4	3	-	1	-	-	18
DEN	1	4	3	2	-	1	2	-	13
GER	42	23	12	14	-	8	-	-	99
POL	28	7	-	-	15	-	-	-	50
LITH	4	3	2	-	1	-	2	-	12
LAT	3	1	1	1	1	1	-	-	8
EST	1	1	3	1	-	-	-	-	6
	88	46	29	23	17	11	5	-	219
	40.2%	21.0%	13.2%	10.5%	7.8%	5%	2.3%		

The region has 219 Members in the European Parliament. The strongest representation from the Baltic Sea Region comes via the EPP. Of MEPs from the region, 40% come from the family of the EPP. The S&D has 21% of the elected Members, while Members of the ALDE occupy 13.2% of the Baltic Sea seats. This implies that more than half of the MEPs from the Baltic Sea Region are elected from the EPP and ALDE groups. The group of Greens has 10% of the region’s MEPs.

Inside the European party groups, the Baltic Sea voice is strongest in the EPP and ALDE groups in which the Baltic

Sea voice can claim one-third of the MEPs. The Baltic Sea Greens have little representation in their European Parliament party group. This strengthens the strategic position that the EPP and the ALDE have in the Baltic Sea political space.

One should not draw hasty conclusions from these figures. Only a fraction of MEPs from Germany and Poland are elected from the Northern provinces and states. On the other hand, representatives elected from those areas can create remarkable strength in support of Baltic Sea issues in the Parliament if they are able to convince others of their views.

An organised Baltic Sea caucus, however, is absent from the European Parliament. There is no such caucus in any of the party groups, nor in the Parliament in general. MEPs from the region meet occasionally as a caucus inside party groups when there are special issues like intra-group nomination and selection cases. The Parliament has hosted the Parliamentary Intergroup on the Baltic Sea. It is, however, Baltic Sea open to all MEPs interested in Baltic Sea issues. The Intergroup was of great value in pushing forward the European Parliament strategy resolution.

The profile of the European Parliament has been much less visible in the implementation phase. The major input was the Parliament's successful campaign to get financing for the Baltic Sea Strategy in the annual budget for 2010.

## 'Partners already active'

The region is very rich in civil society organisations and networks, which are active hosts to the 'partners already active in the region'. The boom time for the establishment of civil society networks was the 1990s. The trend was attached to the socialisation process. In particular the Nordic civil societies were active.

A new element the Baltic Sea Region has seen is the advance of para-diplomacy: the foreign policy actions and capacities of sub-state entities, their participation in international relations independently of their state authorities and their will and ability to pursue their own interests. 'Para-diplomacy' means that sub-state entities practise foreign relations independently of their national state in pursuit of their own specific interests.

No doubt para-diplomacy, as a method for subnational entities to promote their interests, will play a prominent role in the coming Baltic Sea governance. The first governance drafts do not pay attention to the phenomenon. In particular the experiences of cities and city networks in further building the external dimension should be exploited. In a similar way the northern regions of Germany (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Schleswig-Holstein) and the voivodeships of Poland on the Baltic Sea have natural interests in the Baltic Sea Region and Strategy. By their size they fit into the category of Baltic states. They also demonstrate Baltic Sea-ness and interest in Baltic Sea cooperation. Incorporating them into the Baltic Sea political space could also open channels of influence and pressure to Berlin and Warsaw to take more political actions oriented to the Baltic Sea.

The region hosts an intense network of twin cities, largely unexploited as a network crossing the border line to the adjacent area. Of the 106 member cities of the Union of the Baltic Cities, 96 have twin cities. The total number of bilateral twin city pairs is more than 500. This is a remarkable network of relationships that has attracted very little attention. City networks in many ways constitute a key structure in the Baltic Sea Region. Cities as autonomous actors offer a platform for linking the non-EU region to the area of the Baltic Sea Strategy. Cities provide help and the exchange of experiences, and often also best practices on how to adapt to economic integration.

Para-diplomacy will not be limited only to covering relations between regions and cities in the region. It is often seen also as an instrument for adapting to globalisation. 'Local' and 'global' are not antitheses but support each other. Para-diplomacy in the Baltic Sea Region so far has been an instrument for representing interests at the European level. Its value is in managing the external dimension of the Baltic Sea Strategy with the adjacent regions.

## 6 The External Governance of the Region

The Baltic Sea Strategy of the European Union will define the borders of the Baltic Sea. The strategy is strictly an internal strategy of the European Union, as the mandate of 2007 implies. But should it be modified into a policy framework with a built-in mechanism for an external dimension? And if so, how far should the external dimension reach? What issues should it cover? The strategy has to confront these questions.

The strategy, in spite of being an internal strategy of the EU, covers intentionally or unintentionally the fringe areas of the Baltic Sea area as well. Although the European Union has established policies concerning adjoining areas (a strategy for Russia and the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, the Northern Dimension Action Plan, programmes for the Arctic Region and the New Neighbourhood Policy), a defined policy of coordination and monitoring of activities is needed to fully exploit the possibilities of incorporating adjacent regions into the Baltic Sea Strategy.

Russia, as the main ‘user’ of the Baltic Sea, should be incorporated into the strategy. The Russia–Baltic Sea Region relationship is part of a wider EU–Russia connection. This in theory provides a structure for the relationship between Russia and the Baltic Sea Region as well. However, the negotiations for a new treaty framework have been deadlocked for years. The political atmosphere for an advance in negotiations has been unfavourable. Under these conditions the Baltic Sea Region could serve as a pilot region for finding new forms of collaboration

between the EU Member States and Russia as well as with other adjoining regions.

There are concrete areas where the presence of Russia as well as Belarus and Ukraine would help to address common Baltic Sea issues: maritime policy, environmental policy issues and transport issues, energy, security and safety issues in particular. In addition, hard security issues are increasingly being felt in the region, in particular after the war in Georgia.

Currently Russia is a full member of the Council of the Baltic Sea States, HELCOM and few other intergovernmental bodies in the region. However, the Baltic Sea Strategy as an internal strategy of the European Union cannot incorporate Russia or any other non-Member State directly. Special institutional arrangements are needed.

The Russian federal bureaucracy seems not to be interested in cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. The Baltic Sea as a region appears not to have priority in the foreign policy of Russia. Moscow considers the Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region as only one of many dimensions in its international relations. The challenge is to determine what the EU and its Baltic Sea Strategy can provide to Russia to balance the Chinese influence. Russia sees the world in great power terms and the Baltic Sea is not a region on that stage.

Adjacent regions go beyond Russia as well. Both the immediate neighbourhood of the Baltic Sea (Belarus, Ukraine) and the more distant neighbourhood (the Caucasus, the Black Sea) are on the agenda of the external relations of the Baltic Sea countries. Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine have a special focus. One of the future challenges of the Baltic Sea Strategy shall undoubtedly be its relation both to the Northern Dimension and the emerging Eastern Dimension of the EU.

Institutional solutions must follow the logic of informal institutions. Informal institutions imply behavioural regularity which is based on shared rules that are created, 'habits of thought' that are communicated and enforced by the partners and existing outside officially sanctioned and enforced institutions. They include mechanisms of obligation and are regarded as legitimate by the partners. Informal rather than formal institutionalisation, if elaborated as an idea, could open the way to bringing Russia and other partners into the Baltic Sea arrangements.

The growing great power presence of Russia is evident in the region. The aspiration to be seen and recognised as a great power has been one of the most dominant features of Russian foreign policy during the Putin regime. Russia has consequently become increasingly self-confident in international relations.

This is happening in the Baltic Sea Region as well. Russia's increasing dependency on energy transport through the Baltic Sea has forced it to begin to strengthen her military presence in the region. New military installations are under construction, and modernisation of the Baltic Sea fleet has started. Energy and security, via the concept of energy security, will dominate the security debate in the region.

The Baltic Sea Region is a highly complex security space which consists of several sub-spaces. In institutional terms the security space is dominated by six NATO members. With the exception of Finland and Sweden all the EU Member States are also members of NATO. It is to a great extent an internal sea of both the EU and NATO. The presence of NATO is enhanced through the membership of Finland and Sweden in the NATO Partnership Program. They are, by NATO definition, 'advanced partners'. In a similar way

Denmark is a deviant case in the area; it is a member of NATO and the EU but does not participate in the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

The most recent dimension in the security policy debate is the wave of discussions on Nordic Defence cooperation. The Stoltenberg report was received with considerable interest by the Nordic countries. But it is hard to judge on the basis of the current debates how much real interest there is in the Nordic defence cooperation. It will be very difficult to get commitments from the states for a common policy of any kind.

## 7 The Next Steps

### Strengthening political commitment

The Baltic Sea needs its own agenda as a macro-region. The agenda for the region is currently dominated either by the EU or by national actors. The strategy is a useful framework, which, however, needs a political platform for implementation and commitment.

The political commitment model provided by the strategy documents is neither effective nor accountable. Much of the practical implementation of the Baltic Sea Strategy is in the hands of the 'partners already active.' They have shown a remarkable interest and devotion to the strategy. That moment will not last forever. The proposed model of implementation does not give partners possibilities for participation in the decision-making; neither does it provide instruments of accountability.

Strengthening political coordination between the political forces in the region on a transnational basis would be not only the first but also a necessary step. This is needed not only for the region's agenda setting but also to put pressure on governments to keep their commitments and to provide for accountability in the implementation.

The time for political coordination inside the region is now. Political power in the eight Member States lies strongly with the centre-right political forces. The political balance in the region will not stay as it is forever. There is every reason to anticipate that political coordination would be relatively easy to set into motion and establish. The Parliamentary institutions are in place. The region needs political leadership to open strategy-related political coordination.

Political consultation and coordination at the level of the European Parliament is also lacking. It takes place occasionally and sporadically, often in association with budgetary issues and in matters of selection for and nomination to political offices. It is tactical in nature, although the need is evident in matters of political substance and strategic matters. Budgetary matters have recently provoked cooperation on an ad hoc basis. Established forms of cooperation are needed.

## Reforming the existing institutions

The Baltic Sea Region is at a turning point. The Baltic Sea Strategy provides a new and even detailed framework. But it offers very few concrete instruments for the implementation of the strategy. The time has come to open deliberations at the level of government representatives on strengthening the coordination instruments. This is needed not only to develop

a combined single voice and the resulting influence in the EU's decision-making but also, and perhaps in particular, in contacts with Russia and other adjacent regions.

The region needs a forum where its common interest in the strategy can be formulated. Setting the priorities of the region has not yet been realised or has been done inadequately because there is no suitable institutional framework designed for this. The Baltic Sea Region hosts a great number of institutions—too many, perhaps. The 1990s saw a mushrooming of organisations and networks, public and private, whose main purpose was the socialisation of the new market economies into Western European structures and, indeed, into EU membership.

But the existing institutions that could contribute to Baltic Sea cooperation have largely lost their purpose as a consequence of EU enlargement. Many of the institutions of the 1990s have practically ceased to exist. A comprehensive assessment of the existing institutional setup is needed. For intergovernmental collaboration, with a view to speaking with one voice, no adequate institution is available.

For the Baltic Council, intensive cooperation with Nordic countries was meaningful before and after accession, in the same way the frameworks of the NB8 (Nordic–Baltic 8) and the NB6 both serve as platforms for cooperation. Self-evidently the Council of the Baltic Sea States is an important institution of reference for the Baltic countries. The Nordic Prime Ministers and other ministers meet in the framework of the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Baltic Ministers do the same in their common forum.

There are good reasons to question the rationality of keeping the Nordic and Baltic institutions separate. Perhaps the

current NB6 cooperation taking place in Brussels could be brought to the region as well and developed into an institution of political coordination, eventually to be politicised. That would become a much-needed forum for political coordination within the Baltic Sea Strategy framework as well.

### Focus on the external dimension

The external dimension of the Baltic Sea Strategy is a 'hidden agenda'. The Communication and the Action Plan only briefly point to the external dimension. The incorporation of the adjoining area, in particular Russia, into Baltic Sea regional cooperation would be a gain for the integration process. Currently, however, Russia feels excluded because it does not belong to European institutions.

A particular dimension of the strategy is its unique nature as a pilot project for macro-regionalisation. This creates the possibility that the region could influence European dynamics. There is every reason to assume that macro-regionalisation will be a permanent feature of the evolution of European integration in the coming years. The eight Member States of the region could actively demonstrate and 'sell' the solutions and models created in the region. The region has the power to be an example if it so wishes. So far no signs of this type of external dimension are visible.

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## Esko Antola

Dr Esko Antola has held various teaching positions at the University of Turku as well as other Finnish universities in the field of international relations. He was the director and co-founder of the Institute for European Studies in Turku before his current position as the holder of Jean Monnet Chair ad personam on European Institutions at the University of Turku. Dr Antola served as the Director of Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence, University of Turku, 2000 - 2007. He served as a Special Advisor to the European Commission (2009-2010). Currently Dr Antola is the Director Centrum Balticum, a think tank specialised in Baltic Sea Issues. Dr Antola was a Visiting Fellow at Oxford University and Yale University.

His main research interests cover a wide range of issues of European integration: the Reforms of the European Union, Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU, Transatlantic Relations, Small States in the EU and the Economic Policy Coordination in the Economic and Monetary Union. His current activities are focused on macro-regionalization in Europe with a special emphasis of Baltic Sea Area. Dr Antola has published close to 200 scholarly books and articles on international affairs, European integration and the Baltic Sea Region policies .He also serves as an expert to the Parliament of Finland, the Finnish Government and the national media.



