
BALTIC REGION IN BECOMING: FROM THE COUNCIL OF THE BALTIC SEA STATES TO THE EU'S STRATEGY FOR THE BALTIC SEA AREA

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Abstract

The first decade of the 21st century approaches its end and now it is possible to recognize clear signs of returning of visionary thinking to depict the Baltic Sea Area (BSA). The BSA has again become politically attractive. At the moment the most prominent sign of the return of the BSA into political agenda is the European Union's Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. High hopes but also skepticism have been associated with the strategy during an intensive and in many parts extraordinary era of planning. In this article the current revival of the BSA is compared with 'golden days' of the Baltic Sea cooperation in the 1990s and the main changes since then are pointed out.

Introduction: a model region?

When the first decade of the 21st century approaches its end it is possible to recognize clear signs of returning of visionary thinking to depict the Baltic Sea Area (BSA). In December 2007 Latvian Foreign Minister Artis Pabriks powerfully narrated the BSA again as necessity for the future of countries around the Baltic Rim:

“Finally, I return to one of our common goals – *regional identity of the Baltic Sea region*, which should be recognized, strengthened and used for our own common good. We don't look alike, we don't speak one language, we don't live in one country and we don't have a joint team in world ice hockey championship. But we share the Baltic Sea, a common history, values and spirit of dynamism, skillfulness and creativity. However, what

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is more important – *we share the same dreams about our region's future: to be competitive, stable, advanced and always a developing region.*¹

The region-building narratives of the 1990s have legitimized the existence of the BSA on imagined historical continuities but in Pabriks' depiction common history is replaced by a common sea and a shared goal to create the 'region's future' that constitutes a new nodal point. The true era of a Baltic region is not in the past but in the future. Pabriks has adopted the Baltic Tiger narrations about a dynamic, innovative and competitive region² to broader BSA and thus made the existence of that region even a necessity to development of individual states.

Pabriks' speech was given at 16th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference while Latvia was chair of the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) – the most prominent single Baltic institution founded in 1992 but that has sought its role in the new BSA that is almost completely inland sea of the EU. For awhile CBSS was almost a forgotten and invisible relic of the past cooperation and function and motivation of the organisation has remained a long blurred. Even if the EU Commission had been a member of the CBSS it has not fit well to the new EU-led Northern Europe. That is mainly because it was created far before the EU's Nordic and Eastern enlargements and it merely constitutes a parallel system integrated into part of the EU. During the past few years a new role for the CBSS has actively been sought represented by Pabriks' remarks. Simultaneously, interests towards BSA have also awakened within the Brussels.

Branding of the BSA has been during past few years again intensive and several action plans has been published in recent years for declaring how to promote more innovative and competitive Baltic Sea Region.³ In certain level the aim has been successful and the image of the BSA as exceptional region has been widely accepted. For example the Vice-President of the European Com-

¹ Intervention by His Excellency Mr. Artis Pabriks, Latvia Foreign Minister and the CBSS Chairman at the 16th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, 27.8.2007, www.am.gov.lv

² Lehti, Marko. "Protégé or Go-between: the Role of the Baltic States after 9/11 in EU-US Relations", *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 38(2), 2007, pp. 127-151.

³ A good example is Baltic Metropolises Network (BaltMET) and its action plan, see <http://www.baltmet.org/pub/> (accessed 9.4.2009)

mission Günter Verheugen's defines the BSA "as the most dynamic parts of Europe. It is a region of high growth rates and an example of economic dynamism and reform."⁴ However, the BSA may not be as integrated and dynamic region as it advocates presented it but it is certainly returning.

At the moment the most prominent sign of the return of the BSA into political agenda is the European Union's Strategy for Baltic Sea Area that is still at moment of writing this article in process and it would be accepted later at autumn 2009 during Swedish presidency. High hopes but also skepticism has been associated with the strategy during intensive and in many parts extraordinary era of planning. Origins of the recent initiative can be dated back to discussions and lobbying done by euro-parliamentarians and Swedish government. So-called Baltic Strategy Working Group of seven members of European Parliament (three of them were Finns, one German, one Estonian, one Latvian and one British representing different political groupings) gave in 2006 to President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso memorandum on Europe's strategy for the BSA according to which goal would to combine the EU institutions and existing Baltic Sea organizations for developing more secure, stable and competitive region.⁵ Beside more traditional economics, culture and education and security questions environmental issues were highly prioritized.⁶ Another major advocate has been the Swedish government who has sought for the major program for crowning its chairmanship. For example Swedish Minister for EU Affairs Cecilia Malmström declares in her speech at December 2007 that "the Baltic area should be Europe's strongest area of growth, and that we should use all opportunities to strengthen the cooperation." The goal would be "deeper integration and creating a more sustainable region".⁷ The goals of the strategy have been presented by four main objectives: to make the BSA as environmentally sustainable place, as a prosperous place,

⁴ Verheugen, Günter. "Baltic Sea Region – at head of reform process", *Baltic Rim Economies*, 5/2007.

⁵ Europe's Strategy for the Baltic Sea region, written by Baltic Strategy Working Group, given to President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso 15.11.2006.

⁶ Beazley, Christopher. "A EU-Strategy for the Baltic Sea region: making a success of the 2004 enlargement", *Baltic Rim Economies*, 6/2007.

⁷ "An EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region", Speech by Cecilia Malmström at discussion with Baltic Intergroup, European Parliament, Strasbourg, 12 Dec 2007, www.sweden.gov.se

as an accessible and attractive place and as a safe and secure place.⁸ It is still too early to analyse practical influences of the strategy to development of the BSA. But what can be argued is about the process itself and how its goals are prioritised.

For contextualizing the current revival of the BSA it is necessary to first return to its golden days in 1990s. The BSA, as we conceptualize it, was invented in the turn of 1980s and 1990s even if the BSA has been presented as a natural and ancient region anchored by the medieval Hanseatic League and other historical experiences. Comparing these two eras offers an interesting option to predict prospects of new regionalism. BSA is often called as an experimental area of European regionalism,⁹ a laboratory of peaceful change¹⁰ and a model region,¹¹ but besides that it has primarily been a dynamic and contingent region that has been in becoming. The process has not been fixed and stable as the BSA has been continuously reproduced in political, social and economic interactions and transactions throughout the region. In this article I am outlining how the process of regionalism has changed and how current revival differs from the 1990s region-building efforts.

1. New regionalism

The BSA is a prime example of so-called 'new regionalism'. Region and regionalism can probably be recognized in any period but it has occurred in different context and its logic has been different. Thus, the regionalism in the interwar period has been different in nature than the first post-World War II era of regionalism, between the 1950s and the 1970s, that was characterized by promoting open and free trade. New regionalism as it is called began in

⁸ Barroso, José Manuel Durão. "EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region", *Baltic Rim Economies*, 5/2008.

⁹ Joenniemi, Pertti. "Can Europe Be Told From the North? Tapping into the EU's Northern Dimension", in F. Möller & S. Pehkonen (eds.), *Encountering the North. Cultural Geography, International Relations and Northern Landscapes*. Publisher: Ashgate Publishing, 2003, P.26.

¹⁰ Hubel, Helmut. "The Baltic Sea Subregion After Dual Enlargement", *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 39 (3), 2004, pp. 283-298.

¹¹ Henningsen, Bernd. "A Model Region. The Baltic Sea", *Baltic Worlds*, 2008, No. 1(1), pp.30-35.

the mid-1980s.¹² As Paasi describes: “Current ‘new regionalism’ is not confined merely to formal inter-state regional organisations and institutions, but is characterised by multidimensionality, complexity, fluidity and non-conformity and by the fact that it involves a variety of state and non-state actors that often come together in rather informal ways”.¹³

Multi-dimensionality has been a characteristic of the BSA from the very beginning. In the very early phase, the activities of NGOs, academics, as well as several sub-state actors were crucial. However, by founding of the CBSS nation-states attempted to achieve major role in cooperation but never fully reached goal. The BSA remained a fluid and vague process that remained open for various stakeholders to incorporate them into BSA and contribute to contest of the BSA. By the late 1990s when the BSA lost partly its political agenda and disappeared from government officials’ speeches, it was this multidimensionality that saved the BSA and activity transformed to other sectors, such as the area of higher education. By the EU’s strategy it looks as though the BSA is returning to the political agenda but in new form.

New regionalism is often associated with the rise of a Europe of regions and thus is why it is intertwined with the European Union. The process, however, has been world wide and not just isolated in Europe. Further, even if the EU has been involved in several regionalism processes, it has been engaged in different manners to different processes. “New regionalism is both the context and result of the ongoing *re-scaling* of the state”¹⁴ and the EU itself is part of that process. Interaction and transaction among regions in different scale – sub- and supra-state units, cross-border, etc. – is contingent and should be studied in each case.

The EU has been involved and present in regionalist processes in the BSA from the very beginning, but its position has been drastically changed during the past two decades. In the very early phase the BSA can be interpreted as a kind of counter-narration to the western European led integration process and it represented, at least, a partly parallel process to the European Commu-

¹² Fawn, Rick. “Regions’ and their study: wherefrom, what for and whereto?” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 35, 2009, pp.8-9.

¹³ Paasi, Anssi. “The resurgence of the ‘region’ and ‘regional identity’: theoretical perspectives and empirical observations on regional dynamics in Europe”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 35, 2009, p. 127.

¹⁴ Paasi, p. 128.

nity. On the other hand, it was heavily influenced by the new regionalism that emerged in Western Europe and the rhetoric of new regionalism was borrowed from that process. In more general terms, the BSA was a contribution to the rescaling of the state after the end of the Cold War. Exclusiveness of borders was replaced by the post-sovereign idea of transparency and the spatial imagination was free from state borders or at least new freedom was sought. The state's monopoly of foreign relations was also challenged and new entities actively engaged themselves into Europe making though the BSA cooperation.¹⁵

It is widely agreed that regional projects are socially constructed, and that the notion of 'region-building' has been developed to describe processes. Iver Neumann¹⁶ emphasised how region-building requires 'region-builders' who "imagine a certain spatial and chronological identity for a region, and disseminated their imagined identity to other". Paasi, however, in his recent article reminds us that "region-building should not be understood literally" and comprehend regions as a product of social engineering but instead "regions should be seen as complicated constellations of agency, social relations and power".¹⁷ Regions are entities that "perpetually 'becoming' instead of just 'being'". That is relevant focus to scrutinize region that of institutionalisation of regions.

Paasi suggests looking at four stages that introduces different analytical perspectives to the institutionalisation of a region. The first is how its territorial shape is depicted. This usually refers to border-shaping processes that can, in the case of regions, vary from 'soft' to 'hard' or from 'inclusive' to 'exclusive' border drawing strategies. The question also refers to the problem of geography. In the region-building process, geographical markers are used but that is not same thing to say that 'geography really matters' or that geographical elements serve as ground for the establishment of a region. Geography has to be made significant.

Paasi's next stage refers to symbolic shaping that refers to the naming and signification. How is a region narrated into being? Symbols attached to the region are important tools to express and strengthen certain interpretations. It

¹⁵ Lehti Marko. "Sovereignty Redefined. Baltic Cooperation and the Limits of National Self-Determination" *Cooperation and Conflict. Nordic Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 34(4), 1999, pp. 413-443.

¹⁶ Neumann, B. Iver. "A region-building approach to Northern Europe", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 20, 1994, pp. 53-74.

¹⁷ Paasi, p. 133.

should also make a distinction between 'the identity of region' and the regional identity or consciousness. Symbolic shaping refers to the first. There are obvious pitfalls in naming and signification in relation to territorial shape. Narratives that aim to legitimize the existence of a certain region have a tendency to over-emphasise the naturalness of region by justifying its existence through pointing to geographic determinism and/or by narrating historical continuities. This kind of argumentation, however, underlines the presence of a region when in contrast a nodal point of new regionalism is becoming and thus dynamic to shape region.

The third stage of institutional shaping "refers to the development of informal and formal institutions that are needed to produce and reproduce other shapes". By institutions Paasi counts a variety of modes of common doing from common habits to firms, financial institutions, local authorities etc. What is regarded as important is to see them as 'regional ways of doing things'. Thus, the rise of a common agenda is part of the institutional shaping of region.

The last stage in Paasi's four-step analysis is the establishment of the region that, according to him means, it is "accepted as part of the regional system and broader consciousness". What this would require differs between supra-state and sub-state region but in general regions are established when they are used "in struggles over power and resources".

Paasi's theory of institutionalization offers a tool to compare early and recent regionalism in the BSA and analytically points out differences and changes. In the following, I will introduce a brief overview of early cooperation and try to implement Paasi's four stages. Then I will concentrate on recent activities and try to map the differences with the early phase and how these differences may impact the overall institutionalisation of the BSA and the establishment of the BSA as one of the core sub-regions of European Union.

2. The first era: how was the BSA invented

The origin of the Baltic Sea cooperation dates back to late 1980s and early 1990s that was followed by an intensive and innovate period of regional institutionalization. The need to depict a new order and to redefine one's own location in Europe was strong in the Nordic states after the end of the Cold

War. The changes in the East, namely the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Communist rule, but also in the West, or more precisely south of Norden such as deepening integration and the rise of regions, worried the Nordic states. As a result, the changing international order cried out for new answers. The BSA was the answer to both worries. Recognising a shared past with the eastern Baltic lands also includes an idea of moral responsibility that gained its expression from time to time as the patronizing policies towards the newly independent Baltic States. The image of the BSA introduced a counter-vision to central and western European based growth regions. The BSA was presented as a future region that would become one of Europe's leading regions. Thus it was a programme to prevent the marginalisation of the area and simultaneously patronize the eastern Baltic nations by helping them move from post-Soviet anarchy to the Nordic order. It also proved to be a new kind of identity coordinate included in national identities and a vision of a new kind of international order based on regionalism and blurred borders.¹⁸

While the countries on the western shore of the Baltic Sea were imagining a new BSA, the Baltic States were becoming with the Baltic label. Even if outsiders have used to label Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as a *Baltic*, the notion is far from being unproblematic. In the late 1980s, during their 'signing revolution', Baltic solidarity was still strong and joint demonstrations, in particular, the human chain from Tallinn to Vilnius, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty, expressed a feeling of common interests and a shared position. Joint institutions, such as the Baltic Council and the Baltic Assembly, were created immediately after regaining independence among the Baltic parliaments and governments,¹⁹ but soon solidarity started to fade away and by the late 1990s the notion of the Baltic had changed to be something that was rarely used in public and even representing something potentially shameful. Estonian foreign minister Toomas Hendrik Ilves expressed the most striking argument when he unequivocally denied that Estonia belonged to a

¹⁸ Lehti, Marko. "Possessing a Baltic Europe. Retold National Narratives in the European North", in *Post-Cold War Identity Politics. Northern and Baltic Experiences*. Eds. Marko Lehti & David J. Smith, London and Portland: Frank Cass, 2003. pp.21-34.

¹⁹ Jurkynas, Mindaugas. *How Deep Is Your Love? The Baltic Brotherhood re-examined*, Vilnius, 2007.

Baltic group: “I think it is time to do away with poorly fitting, externally imposed categories. It is time that we recognize that we are dealing with three very different countries in the Baltic area, with completely different affinities. There is no Baltic identity with a common culture, language group, religious tradition.”²⁰ Since the early years of the 1990s the omnipresent programme of all three was a ‘return to Europe or the West’ and the Baltic label was seen as a reminder of the Soviet times – the eastern orientation that they desperately wanted to escape. “What the three Baltic States have in common almost completely derives from shared unhappy experiences imposed upon us from outside: occupations, deportations, annexation, sovietization, collectivization, russification” is how Ilves expressed the basis of common Baltic heritage.²¹ The usage of the Baltic-label was then seen to express a continuation of ‘easternisation’ by signifying those post-Soviet countries in transition while the Balts desperately tried to distant themselves from the Soviet legacy and envisage the dividing-line of civilizations running along the Baltic-Russian border.²²

The western Baltic understanding concentrated on focussing on the whole Baltic Sea area and simultaneously maps traces of a common Baltic history and construction of brave visions of the future region. The origins of this new reading of Baltic traced back to the late 1980s when the first signs of the eastern bloc’s collapse emerged. As a result, the idea of the new Hansa was launched from Schleswig-Holstein with the vision of a common future based on the common heritage of the medieval Hanseatic League. Later in the early 1990s the Swedes, Danes and even the Finns narrated their national past beyond their existing state-borders and re-founded and re-interpreted the Swedish or Danish Baltic presence in past centuries on the eastern side of the Baltic Sea. These themes had been silenced for a long time. For example, Swedish public memory had valued the Swedish great power era as an unnatural phase of Swedish

²⁰ T.H. Ilves: ‘Estonia as a Nordic country’ speech at the Swedish Institute of Foreign Affairs 14.12.1999. www.vm.ee

²¹ Ibidem

²² Kuus, Merje. “Europe’s eastern expansion and the reinscription of otherness in East-Central Europe”, *Progress in Human Geography*, 28(4), 2004, pp. 472-489; Lamoreaux, Jeremy W. and Galbreath, David J. “The Baltic States as ‘Small States’: Negotiating the ‘East’ by Engaging the ‘West’”, *Journal of Baltic Studies* 39(1), 2008, pp. 1-14.

history. The new national imagination exceeded beyond state borders and in particular the old Iron Curtain, finding similarities and common heritage with the Baltic States. The Baltic became a new identity coordinate among the western Baltic nations representing an answer to the post-Cold War challenge.²³

Seemingly in the eastern and western shores of the Baltic Sea there was a lack of common understanding as to what the term “Baltic” means. For some, it referred to the Soviet legacy shared by three Baltic States, while to others it represented a new brave vision and reinterpretation of the past and response to a changing world. It is easy to recognize fundamental differences in understanding. Sovereignty and borders were dominating principles for the Balts as they rebuilt their nation-states, while the Swedes, Danes, Finns and Germans were looking for new models of international organisation beyond the existing sovereign states. Such visions were based on fuzzy borders that blurred the old exclusive divisions. This contradictory understanding is described as being between modern and post-modern.²⁴ Nonetheless, the Nordic people were not totally post- or late-modern, nor were the Balts entirely modern, but what is obvious is that regionalism allured the Nordics while it remained a strange concept for the Baltic States that were still restoring and consolidating their state sovereignty. The result of this divergent emphasis was a lost opportunity to find a common understanding for the Baltic label and for the possibility to create a shared Baltic identity. In the late 1990s, the moment has already passed when the BSA started to lose its political importance as a future-region for the Nordic people and what was left was more or less a scene of regional cooperation based on shared interests and certain limited elements of the past.²⁵

²³ Lehti, Marko. “Possessing a Baltic Europe. Retold National Narratives in the European North”, in *Post-Cold War Identity Politics. Northern and Baltic Experiences*. Eds. Marko Lehti & David J. Smith, London and Portland: Frank Cass, 2003. pp.14-18, 31-32.

²⁴ Wæver, Ole. “The Baltic Sea: A Region after Post-Modernity”, in P. Joenniemi (ed.), *Neo-Nationalism or Regionality. The Restructuring of Political Space Around the Baltic Rim*. Stockholm: NordREFO, 1997, P. 315.

²⁵ Lehti, Marko. “The Future of the Lost Future? The Baltic Sea Area after the Transition Era.” *NORDEUROPAforum. Zeitschrift für Politik, Wirtschaft und Kultur*, 1/2003, pp. 43-53; Aalto, P. “European Integration and the Declining Project of Building a Baltic Sea Region”, in J. H. Stampehl, A. Bannwart, D. Brekenfeld & U. Palth (eds.), *Perceptions of Loss, Decline and Doom in the Baltic Sea Region*. Berlin: Belrliner Wissenschafts Verlag, 2004.

Innovative energy of the early 1990s Baltic cooperation contributed to foundation of several BSA based organisation and networks. Among all others, the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) founded at 1992 by the German and Danish foreign ministers' initiative had remained a prime symbol of institutionalising the Baltic space. During the Cold War years, only two Baltic Sea organisations were founded. Helsinki Commission was founded 1974 by signing a single convention by the then seven Baltic coastal states. By the convention pollution around an entire sea were made subject of regional cooperation but there was still major limitation for cooperation. Soon after the end of the Cold War a new Convention was signed in 1992 by all the states bordering on the Baltic Sea, and the European Community. After ratification, the Convention entered into force in 2000. The new Convention covers the whole of the Baltic Sea's area, including inland waters as well as the water of the sea itself and the sea-bed.²⁶ In similar terms, the Union of Baltic Cities had its roots in 1980s but it only gained any real importance until the 1990s.

Beside above two organisations various new organisation and networks were created in 1990s. Different NGOs and sub-state actors were most active players in the early state. For them it was a new moment to enter into international cooperation and contribute to regionalism. Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation (BSSSC) was founded as an umbrella organisation for coordinating emerging activity and for offering a platform for the creation of new networks.²⁷ Until the end of 1990s, the higher education field played an active role in Baltic networking and thus extended institutionalisation into a new field.²⁸ All this networking, interaction and transaction emerged on spontaneous and pluralistic terms. On the other hand, several mainly EU based regional funding systems have guided networking to certain fields but simultaneously NGOs have remained active such as for Baltic Sea NGO Forum's meetings shows.²⁹

²⁶ Baltic Development Forum. *State of the Region Report 2008. Sustaining growth at the Top of Europe*, 2008. Available at www.bdforum.org, p. 93-95; About HELCOM see: http://www.helcom.fi/helcom/en_GB/aboutus/ (accessed at 8.4.2009)

²⁷ Suominen, T., Antola, E. and Haukkala, H. *Networks in the Baltic Sea Region*, Turku: Jean Monnet Unit, 2000.

²⁸ Henningsen, Bernd. "A Model Region. The Baltic Sea", *Baltic Worlds*, , Vol. 1(1), 2008, pp.30-35.

²⁹ <http://www.bsngoforum.org/>

3. A new momentum

The eastern enlargement of EU in 2004 completely changed the previous constellation and dynamism of the region. The BSA has changed to be more intensively treated as only within EU framework and all activity here is, in one way or other, dependent on what has happened and had been decided in Brussels and elsewhere within the EU.³⁰ The long struggle to gain membership also drastically changed the Balts' attitude towards regional cooperation and in particular toward Baltic cooperation – defined as both the small Baltic group consisting three Baltic States and also towards the broad BSA.

From the Balts perspective, the previous strive for membership has been replaced by efforts to cope with day-to-day EU politics. The significance of the Baltic region has been broadly recognised in recent years and the notion of the Baltic is not anymore regarded only as something shameful among the three Baltic States but it has been seen as a potential resource. Estonian foreign minister Urmas Paet has concluded that there is a new momentum for the Baltic group after the fulfilment of the EU and NATO memberships. There are, in his view, renewed common interests to be shared by all three Baltic States within a common framework.³¹ The Baltic label is now seen to be a flexible signifier that has complementary relations with other labels. It deducts from the value of the others but rather adds something valuable to the overall constellation. So far major common interests within the EU have been seen lying on energy security and perhaps the most crucial single issue concerns resistance of Nord Stream gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea connecting Russia and Germany but bypassing the Baltic States.³² The heads of the Baltic States are also at the moment more willing to give joint political statements and communiqués. This was already demonstrated in the eve of the Iraq war

³⁰ Hubel, Helmut. "The Baltic Sea Subregion After Dual Enlargement", *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 39 (3), 2004, pp. 283-298.

³¹ Report by Foreign Minister of Estonia Urmas Paet on the activities of the Baltic Council of Ministers in 2005, Baltic Council, Tallinn, 25 Nov 2005, www.vm.ee/eng/kat_140/7138.html?arhiiv_kuup=kuup_2005. (accessed 2 Jan. 2007)

³² Nielsen, Kristian. "Opportunities and Limitations for the Baltic States of the EU-Russia Strategic Partnership", *Baltic Security & Defence Review*, Vol 9, 2007, pp. 109-130.

and common statements were recently expressed, for example, in supporting Georgia in its conflict with Russia.³³

The EU is seen more and more as a platform for competing and allying regions. In this game, the image of the Baltic group has been strengthened but the question that concerns with whom it should cooperate remains. As Latvian foreign minister Maris Riekstins emphasizes: “success of today’s Europe lies within its regions but Nordic is not anymore seen as only partner.”³⁴ Beside Nordic there are other options like Visegrad group and Benelux as Estonian foreign minister Paet reminds.³⁵ For the Baltic States, cooperation with Nordic countries was traditionally the most important option. In its early phase, particularly the Estonians, used to describe their country as Nordic. Some kind of culmination of “nordicization” of Estonia took place during Toomas Hendrik Ilves’ period as foreign minister. He denied that Estonia is a Baltic country but instead has changed to be just another ‘boring Nordic country’.³⁶

Norden has, however, remained resilient. Even if Norden has opened up eastwards, the Nordic core has remained exclusive.³⁷ From the Nordic perspective for example Estonia has not become Nordic even though it may be approached as Nordic and has become a close partner; it is still a Baltic partner. After EU membership, the Balts’ view on cooperation has similar tones. They do not anymore want to become Nordic but Nordic and Baltic are presented to have “different histories of our societies” and differences in economic development but at the same time closeness and “common political and cultural traits” indicating that they may have common interests in the EU.³⁸ Originally the so-called five plus three, Nordic plus Baltic, cooperation was already in

³³ Declaration of Presidents of the Baltic States, 10.8.2008, www.am.gov.lv

³⁴ Opening speech of H.E. Maris Riekstins, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, in seminar “Baltic Sea Region in Europe”, Stockholm, January 17, 2008, www.am.gov.lv

³⁵ Address by Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet to the 13th Baltic Council of Ministers, 23.11.2007, www.vm.ee

³⁶ Ilves: ‘Estonia as a Nordic country’ 14.12.1999. www.vm.ee

³⁷ Smith, J. David. “Nordic Near Abroad or New Northern Europe? Perspectives on Post-Cold War Regional Co-operation in the Baltic Sea Area”, in *Post-Cold War Identity Politics. Northern and Baltic Experiences*. Eds. Marko Lehti & David J. Smith. London and Portland: Frank Cass, 2003, p.62.

³⁸ Baltic Cooperation: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, memorandum, 25.9.2005; Urmas Paet: “Future Cooperation Trends of the Baltic and Nordic Countries”, 28.4.2005. www.wm.ee

2000 renamed as NB8. There are regular types of meetings and discussions on a higher political level. After the Baltic States' EU membership, Nordic and Baltic ministers have held their mutual meeting before the European Council. However, the contests of meetings have been informative and it has not generated a strong and consistent group.³⁹ This gives room for the BSA as one possible option.

An interesting example of a new conceptualization and activity is the project "*Balticness*" that the Latvian Foreign Ministry launched during its presidency of the CBSS. "*Balticness*" reflects the Baltic Sea as the artery of life of the entire region and its society, and the countries of the region as competitive, creative, dynamic, multicultural states populated by professional, skilful and candid people" as the project goal was defined. What made the project '*Balticness*' fresh was its emphasis on culture. As a result, the project organized photo exhibitions and jazz concerts.⁴⁰

The EU's Strategy for the BSA has brought a new kind of activity that is blurring the borders between the EU, state, sub-state and NGO levels. The Commission has adopted very active but simultaneously consultative role and thus trying to avoid Brussels' dominion. Several stake holders meetings are organized and even commenting through web-page was possible. "In total 109 authorities, institutions or individuals responded to the consultation and presented their views. Out of these, 8 were Member States (every Member State presented a position paper), 3 non Member States (Russia, Belarus, Norway), 31 were regional and local authorities, 48 were inter-governmental and non-governmental bodies, 19 were representatives from the private sector out of which 2 were experts / researchers and 3 were individuals".⁴¹

The BSA is obviously wanted to be treated as a model case. Instead of emphasising the strategy either as the Commission's policy or region's strategy of its own position in the EU the whole process is wanted to present as

³⁹ Jurkynas, Mindaugas. *How Deep Is Your Love? The Baltic Brotherhood re-examined*, Vilnius, 2007.

⁴⁰ Project 'Balticness', Latvian Presidency in the Council of the Baltic Sea States 12007-2008, www.latvija.ie/en/cbsss/Balticness/ (accessed 15.5.2009)

⁴¹ Baltic Development Forum. *State of the Region Report 2008. Sustaining growth at the Top of Europe*, 2008. Available at www.bdforum.org, p. 87; also see EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, Regional Policy – Inforegion, ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/cooperation/baltic/ (accessed 8.4.2009)

multi-dimensional process involving in early phase Commission, member-state, regional and local governments, NGOs, business and academic sector. This kind of tactic fits well for the BSA that emerged in its early phase as a bottom-up initiative, but was soon captured by the states and then left again for NGOs. The strategy can be seen as an effort to combine existing activities and to create an intermediate level, between the EU and its member states without grounding any new institutions. "The EU Baltic Strategy is starting to become the crystallization point for many regional institutions to see their part in the overall agenda and collaborate with partners in pursuing specific themes."⁴²

Also, in many respects, the strategy is experimental within the EU context. It would be the first regional based programme that is focused solely to EU territory while previous regional approaches like Northern Dimension or Barcelona Process are created for managing cooperation and interaction cross the EU border with the third countries. Thus the strategy is attempting to develop, if successful, a "transnational area of enhanced cooperation and governance" and a new level of governance between the nation state and the supranational community. If this experiment proves to be successful, there would probably be similar initiatives that follow in other areas like in the Danube.⁴³

The prioritization of environmental issues in the strategy is also exceptional. The Baltic Sea is presented as the most polluted sea in the world and following the strategy environmental awareness is becoming a major dynamic of regional cooperation. The pollution of the sea has been also issue in the Northern Dimension (ND) policy and indeed the most concrete achievements of the ND are linked with environmental cooperation. The Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (NDEP) was founded in 2002.⁴⁴ By the EU's Strategy for Baltic Sea Region environmental issues are adopted in the sphere of high politics. In particular, Sweden and Finland have prioritized the goal to achieve a more environmentally sustainable sea and it is seen as a crucial precondition

⁴² Ibidem, P. 30.

⁴³ Schymik, C. and Krumrey, P. *EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Core Europe in the Northern Periphery?* Working Paper 2009/08, Research Division EU Integration, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2009.

⁴⁴ <http://www.ndep.org/>

for the success of the area.⁴⁵ According to the strategy, environmental integration is a step into the new level and obviously the BSA is forging ahead of the other regions in this sector.

One thing is sure – that the strategy has generated a new kind of activity and dynamism around the BSA that has stagnated since late 1990s. The new strategy would bring the BSA in the political spotlight again, but so far it has reminded us to merely the EU's strategy for the BSA rather than Baltic Sea countries' joint strategy for the EU. Major question will be a role of Russia in the strategy that is going to be an internal strategy and thus excluding Russia. Northern Dimension policy is reserved at the moment for external relations. The EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland all mutually signed the recent 2006 framework agreement.⁴⁶ However how these two, the strategy and the ND, would be fit together still remains open.

At the time of writing, it seems that the final proposal for the EU's Strategy on BSA would have three pitfalls. First would be governance. No new institution has been created and probably no new money will be received but the strategy's funding should be confined to existing financing instruments. Thus implementation of the strategy would require institutional reforms of the existing BSA organizations. One problem would be that they include Russia as a full member, while the strategy is created as an internal EU matter. Another major challenge would be how to reorganize the current organizations without any single organization. Can the responsibility be carried collectively or would it require a clearly pointed holder? In stakeholders meetings the importance of education, research and culture was emphasized as a question that has received just minor attention in the Commission's proposal for Action Plan. That could pose a risk to the whole strategy because the BSA's real strength has been a widely spread knowledge-based society while institutionalization and network-

⁴⁵ Lehtomäki, Paula. "Cleaner, safer and brighter future of the Baltic Sea", *Baltic Rim Economies*, 5/2008; Luoto, Jari. "EU focuses on the Baltic Sea", *Baltic Rim Economies*, 5/2008; Carlgren, Andreas. "The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region as a tool for implementing the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan", *Baltic Rim Economies*, 3/2008; Compare with Nowicki, Maciej. "Is Poland really the biggest polluter of the Baltic Sea", *Baltic Rim Economies*, 2/2008.

⁴⁶ Lehtinen, Hanna. "The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and its link to the Northern Dimension", *Baltic Rim Economies*, 4/2008.

ing has been most active in this sector in recent years.⁴⁷ The third obvious problem is that the preliminary action plan lacks any proposals regarding spatial planning. The BSA is far from a well-connected region and efficient and easy connection link would be prerequisites for successful regionalization and emergence of broader regional consciousness.⁴⁸

Conclusions

To conclude I would compare by using Paasi's four-stage change from the 1990s to the present. In each of these four variables it is possible to notice remarkable turns that underline changes and new beginnings in BSA regionalism. Further in this term it is easier to also see possible pitfalls.

The territorial shape of the BSA has been defined in rather different terms. In the 1990s the old dividing line was the nodal point that was tried to surpass. Similarities were looked to on the other side but also felt the responsibility to patronize. Simultaneously the Balts tried to merely push the old dividing-line eastwards. Also when post-sovereign territoriality was emphasised on the western shore of the Baltic Sea, the Baltic States borders were interpreted as renewed symbols of sovereignty. This juxtaposition has ended and therefore offering a new option for the BSA. Now it is the *Baltic Sea* that holds central position. The sea is a flexible and vague determiner but the obvious pitfall is the inclusion of Russia and the significance of the Schengen border for definition. Problem is that Russia is simultaneously included and excluded.

Signification and narration of the BSA into being has also its own pitfalls. In 1990s the BSA was justified by pointing out that it is as a historical region and that after the era of false history during the Cold War something more natural would automatically return. These new narrations of history varied from country to country while they were attached to national history narratives but that probably was not a major problem. I would argue merely that presenting the BSA as a natural entity that is returning, generates expectations for the BSA that were too high. If examining BSA as a historical region, it is obvious

⁴⁷ Henningsen, Bernd. "A Model Region. The Baltic Sea", *Baltic Worlds*, Vol. 1(1), 2008, pp. 30-35.

⁴⁸ Schymik, C. & Krumrey, P. *EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Core Europe in the Northern Periphery?* Working Paper 2009/08, Research Division EU Integration, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2009.

that disintegration of a region did not begin with the Iron Curtain but with the era of nationalism represented by territorial bound identities and the rise of modern centralized territorial states crumbled Baltic networks earlier. Besides being a barrier the Baltic Sea has obviously been traditionally the highway that most efficiently transported people and goods from one place to another. But again it was expanding railway system constructed within existing state borders that superseded importance of sea connection. Thus, the BSA was diverse and badly connected after the 1990s but simultaneously its natural connection and unity were emphasized in the region-building discourse. Thus, the created identity or brand of the BSA did not match well with the regional consciousness because it failed to recognize the already established regional differences.

At the moment cooperation is justified by stressing common concerns and responsibilities about the sea, environment as general, about security and about competitiveness. If it is referred to as something of a common property it is rather often immaterial values and norms. Possible pitfalls in the current situation could be leaning too much on the sea and thus omitting connecting among peoples and communities as core dynamic. That situation is well recognized in Finland where the strategy is called as Strategy for Baltic Sea and thus existence of region combining states and societies is omitted.

Institutionalisation of the BSA was truly intensive in the early parts of 1990s if concentrated to networking activities. Tens and hundreds of new organisations were grounded and new networking activity generated. All organisations have their own agenda but it still looks that the overall common agenda and vision of the future was missing. By looking back to the lost glorious days, it was argued that these days would automatically return due to historical connection. Doing regionally lack somehow contest and direction. But on the other hand, the BSA as a region gained an established position during 90s. It was not anymore necessary all the time to justify its existence but it becomes a self-evident scene of cooperation. But on the other hand, even if the BSA gained established position it was limited to certain limited and marginal spheres of societal life and it was not tried to use for example in EU policy and in security issue.

The new strategy would offer a true option for combining different organisations and different actors behind common agenda. But that agenda need to be widely agreed and widely known. Beside the identity of region it is needed to strengthen regional consciousness. For that purpose it is required common

doing. One concrete step for that would be improving connections around the Baltic Rim. It seems that moderate expectations should be connected with the strategy in these terms. The strategy, however, would represent a pilot in the EU's regionalisation and in best cases it could offer for area new visibility and position in the EU. The BSA is generally treated in the EU as marginal area but by the strategy it could in the best case achieve new stronger brand and thus gain more power in shaping European constellations. Vice versa, the same argument can be a good marketing strategy within area to justify importance intensive cooperation around BSA.