



The Baltic Sea Region: A Comprehensive Guide

History, Politics, Culture and Economy
of a European Role Model

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Preface

The Baltic Sea Region (BSR), at the crossroads between East and West, North and South, has long been marked by cultural, ethnic, and ideological borders. Overcoming a history of conflict and separation, the region has undergone dramatic changes since the end of the Cold War. As a result of these changes, the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea established widely valued formats of regional cooperation based on shared opportunities and challenges.

Reflecting this shift, producing a compilation on the Baltic Sea Region was part of the BalticStudyNet project, funded by the European Commission within the Erasmus Mundus Programme. The main aim of this project has been to globally promote the BSR as an area of top-quality, innovative higher education. The project's central activity has been a comprehensive promotion campaign featuring the BSR and its higher education structures.

A few years after the end of the project, we are pleased to present the outcome of this international, multifaceted, and interdisciplinary endeavour. We are grateful to our sponsor and to BSR experts who made this project possible.

Since the Baltic Sea area remains a relative blank spot on the global map, we perceived it as one of our tasks to contribute to spreading information and knowledge about the BSR worldwide. Therefore, we organised events outside the EU – in the US, Canada, China, Australia, and the former USSR. The publication addresses students, young researchers, and other interested parties in and outside the region, even in non-European countries.

This book starts with a comprehensive introductory chapter describing the overall development of the region since the 1980s and including theoretical concepts of the region, regionalism, regionalisation, and region-building. This is followed by two chapters on the history of the Baltic Sea Region and its politics, analysing past and recent developments in great detail. The following chapter provides an overview of the structures of regional cooperation, as well as the political status of the region within the EU. A chapter on the BSR's economies analyses which economic paths the countries of the region, as well as the region as a whole, have taken since the early 1990s. The final chapter explains and analyses the notions of culture in the region and of regional identity.

Preface

We, the authors and editors, are united in our hope that this endeavour will drive further interest, research, and investigation into the Baltic Sea Region.

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Introduction: Emergence of a European Model Region

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1 The Baltic Sea Region: A European Model Region

The Baltic Sea Region (BSR) features prominently among Europe's regions. It has managed to establish itself as a platform for successful economic integration and cooperation with stable rates of economic growth (Henningsen 2008). Simultaneously intense cooperation has been developed in a huge number of other fields, such as environmental protection, energy, spatial planning and infrastructure, and combating organised crime and infectious diseases. Furthermore, cooperative relations with Russia on a regional level have been established.

The BSR provides an interesting example of the regionalism that emerged in the course of the geo-political changes taking place in the late 1980s and early 1990s: European economic integration sped up and the East-West divide withered away, finally disappearing in its previous form. Both processes came about independently, but came to mutually strengthen each other, thereby forging a dynamic that paved the way for the formation of a region where there previously was no such notion of a common space. Various actors in the area took stock of the opportunities at hand to build links across the East-West dividing line, re-detecting and re-confirming historical ties, but also establishing new ones, and thereby ultimately inventing and perpetuating a new space. Today the Baltic Sea Region stands out as an example of a regional formation that, while only newly created, nonetheless constitutes a firm ground for committed action. The Baltic Sea Region is thus an interesting case model for *New Regionalism* and the process of region-building.

The model character of the BSR has changed over time and has been linked to changes in geopolitical context. Starting with the establishment of contacts and cooperative links across the Iron Curtain, it helped keep the geopolitical changes underway on a peaceful path. The restoration of indepen-

dence in the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), could be achieved in a largely non-violent manner, and the issue of large Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia could be settled in a constructive manner. This is all the more striking when compared to other contemporary examples of multinational states, whose demise took on violent forms: the former Yugoslavia perished in a series of cruel wars; the dissolution of the Soviet Union went hand in hand with violent conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan and in Central Asia; the Soviet Republic of Moldova has remained split since a short civil war in 1992 when a separatist movement established the self-proclaimed Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic. And, hardly least of all, have the relations between Russia, and Ukraine and Georgia, deteriorated through Russian military involvement over the last decade.

Following Baltic independence and the demise of the East-West divide, the prospects for further peaceful cooperation loomed large. With the Baltic states and Poland decisively heading towards integration with the West through membership in both the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the BSR turned into a laboratory of European unification (Hubel 1994). Generous support was given to Poland and the Baltic states to ease their transition from planned economy and communist rule to market economy and liberal democracy. EU accession of Finland and Sweden in 1995 and the wish for membership in Poland and the Baltic states made the EU develop a comprehensive framework for cooperation with Eastern neighbours, including Russia (Aalto 2006). In particular, the Northern Dimension policy of the European Union provided a platform for cooperation among EU members and non-members, including both candidate and non-candidate countries in Northern Europe (see Tobias Etzold's chapter). For obvious reasons it was Finland, the first EU country to share a border with Russia, that took the initiative, thereby continuing its traditional efforts on good-neighbourly relations with its Eastern neighbour.

After the EU-accession of Poland and the Baltic states in 2004, the Baltic Sea Region largely had become an inner lake of the EU. The only remaining non-member state on the Baltic shores has been Russia, which neither has the intention, nor the prospect, of membership. In order to create new momentum, a new process was started, which finally resulted in the development and establishment of a European macro-regional strategy (Ozoliņa, Reinholde and Rostoks 2010). Following extensive public consultation led by the European Commission, the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUS-

BSR) was launched during the Swedish EU-Presidency in 2009 (Schymik and Krumrey 2009, Rostoks 2010). The EUSBSR introduced a new governance level in the EU (see also Tobias Etzold's chapter on cooperation structures in this volume) which can be regarded as a further milestone in the regionalisation process, in particular by assigning a role to the European Commission (Metzger and Schmitt 2012).

Russia's approach towards the European Union had been dominated by both a multilateral EU-Russia level, and a bilateral country-to-country level, thereby largely leaving aside cooperation on the Baltic Sea regional level (Makarychev 2010, Sergunin 2013). Initially, the EUSBSR was seemingly designed to only serve the needs of the EU and its member states, while not including Russia, a crucial partner in many fields of cooperation, as an integral part. This initial weakness has been tackled by increased coordination of the EUSBSR with Russia's newly developed strategy for its Northwestern district while the revised EUSBSR Action Plan since 2013 established a *Neighbours* Horizontal Action. Its task is to include stakeholders from non-member countries in the region, especially Russia, but also Norway and Iceland.

The EUSBSR soon inspired other regions, which subsequently developed their own macro-regional strategies: the Danube Region (European Union Strategy for the Danube Region, EUSDR, introduced 2010), the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR, 2014) and the Alpine Region (EUSALP, 2015) (Schymik 2011, Gänzle and Kern 2016).

2 Defining the Baltic Sea Region

2.1 The Baltic Sea

The Baltic Sea is an inland sea of the Atlantic Ocean that divides the Scandinavian Peninsula (Norway and Sweden) from the mainland of Northern, Northeast, and Central Europe. Its northernmost edge lies near the Swedish-Finnish border in the Bay of Bothnia. Its easternmost part, the Gulf of Finland, reaches the Russian metropolis of St. Petersburg, while the southernmost edge is the Szczecin Lagoon near the Polish city of Szczecin. The Baltic Sea proper does not include the Gulfs of Bothnia, Finland, or Riga.

The delineation of the Baltic Sea in the West is a puzzling question. Historically, customs for entering the Baltic Sea were collected by the Kingdom of Denmark in the Danish Straits: at Kronborg castle in Elsinore located at the narrowest point (only 4 km) of the Oresund (which separates the Danish island of Zealand and the Swedish peninsula of Scania); in the city of Nyborg in the Great Belt; as well as in the fortress of Fredericia in the Little Belt. Most contemporary definitions draw the line between the Danish capital Copenhagen and the Swedish city of Malmö in the southern Oresund, where the sea is no more than seven metres deep. Otherwise there are different delineations, such as between the Danish islands further south, or even between Germany and Denmark.

Most of these delineations are related to an important feature of the Baltic Sea: namely that it contains brackish water. In fact, the Baltic Sea is the largest reservoir of brackish water on earth, with a salinity from 1.9% in the Danish straits down to only 0.3–0.5% in the Gulfs of Bothnia and Finland (cf. the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean being at 3.5%). As a sufficient inflow of saltwater is existential for the balance of the ecosystem of the Baltic Sea, definitions that are based on barriers that restrict the inflow of saltwater in the lower layers are quite reasonable in this respect.

The Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (the so-called Helsinki Convention) from 1992 defines the Baltic Sea Area as “the Baltic Sea and the entrance to the Baltic Sea bounded by the parallel of the Skaw in the Skagerrak at 57°44.43’N.” (Helsinki Commission 2008). According to this definition, the Kattegat between Denmark and Sweden – often referred to as a fringe water of the North Sea or a Sea itself – is included in the Baltic Sea.

Apart from the Danish straits, two artificial entrances have been built: the Kiel Canal to the west, bypassing the Cimbrian Peninsula (Jutland) from the North Sea, and the White Sea Canal, crossing Lake Onega and Lake Ladoga to the east.

The Baltic Sea covers an area of 390,000 square kilometres (412,560 km² including the Kattegatt), which is about the size of the US federal states of Montana (381,000 km²) and California (424,000 km²), ranking fourth and third respectively among the US states; the states of Zimbabwe (390,757 km²) or Paraguay (406,750 km²); the Chinese provinces of Yunnan or Gansu (394,100 and 425,800 km² respectively); or half of the Australian province of New South Wales (800,642 km²) (United Nations Statistical Division 2012).

The water volume of the Baltic Sea is 21,631 km³ which compares quite well to the Great Lakes in North America with 22,500 km³. The average depth of the Baltic Sea is only 52 m, its maximum depth being 459 m; cf. Lake Superior with 406 m and the minimum depth of the Atlantic Ocean with 1,500 m between Norway and Greenland.

Because of its brackish water and limited water exchange with the Atlantic Ocean, resulting in an oxygen deficiency, the Baltic Sea is an extremely sensitive ecosystem that suffers from different kinds of pollution and from eutrophication, mainly caused by nutrients from fertilizers used in agriculture. Traditionally, overfishing poses an important threat. Invasive alien species, e. g. brought in through ballast water from ships crossing the world's oceans, also constitute a challenge that increasingly has been highlighted (Gilek et al. 2016). The environmental status of the Baltic Sea, therefore, has been the reason for cooperation across the Iron Curtain since the 1970s, within the framework of the Helsinki Commission.

2.2 The Baltic Sea Region

While it is quite easy to define the Baltic Sea, it is far more complicated to give a useful definition of the Baltic Sea Region. Obviously the Baltic Sea which unites the area surrounding it serves as a point of reference. However, any definition of the region as the Baltic Sea plus any land areas surrounding it necessarily leads to the question: How can a region that includes more than the Baltic Sea itself be delimited in a purposeful way?

A traditional approach in geography is to refer to the drainage or catchment basin, i.e. the area from which the rivers drain to the Baltic Sea. This area is not limited to the nine coastal states but rather includes 14 countries (Rydén 2002: 9f.). The river Oder brings in parts of the Czech Republic while the river Vistula adds parts of Slovakia, Ukraine and in particular Belarus. The drainage area of the Baltic Sea covers 1,745,000 square kilometres which corresponds to the total area of Alaska (1,723,337 km²), China's largest province Xinjiang (1,664,900 km²), the states of Libya (1,759,540 km²) or Iran (1,648,195 km²), the Australian province of Queensland (1,730,648 km²) or a tenth part of Russia (17,098,246 km²). Adding the Baltic Sea itself to this gives a total area of 2,250,000 km² which makes 15 per cent of all Europe (Rydén 2002: 10) or ap-

proximately the size of Saudi Arabia (by 2,149,690 km² the largest country in the Middle East), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (by 2,344,858 km² the second largest country in Africa) or Greenland (2,166,086 km²) (United Nations Statistical Division 2012).

This approach is useful in terms of environmental aspects but has its limits. Indeed, in times when travelling by boat was much easier than through largely inaccessible land areas, trading routes often followed waterways. However, in modern times where more sophisticated technical means make it possible to connect places over longer distances, the delimitation of a region becomes much more complex. Thus, the Baltic Sea Region can include areas beyond its drainage basin.

Another way to tackle this question is to start with the etymology of the region's name. The German medieval bishop and chronicler Adam of Bremen was the first who, in 1075–1076, referred to the Baltic Sea as *Mare Balticum*. Marko Lehti (2005: 20–21) presents three theories that have tried to trace the origin of the word: The first one refers to the Danish belts which commonly are used to delimit the Baltic Sea in the West; secondly, the Slavic word *blato* or *boloto* is said to be a synonym for a lake or swamp district characteristic to the southeastern Baltic; and third, the Latvian and Lithuanian words *balts* and *baltas* respectively, which mean 'white'. Lehti finds this third explanation the most relevant, pointing to the fact that in ancient times, colours were associated with the four points of the compass: While black was marking the North, red was used for the South, and blue was sometimes used for the East, and white for the West. Therefore the Baltic Sea is a 'Western Sea' (*läänemeri*) not only for the Estonians, but for the Latvians and Lithuanians as well.

The meaning of the term Baltic is more ambivalent when being applied to the region's land area. The *Baltic provinces* or *Baltikum* have been widely used labels for the historical regions of Courland, Livonia, and Estonia, covering roughly Latvia and Estonia within their current borders. However, as a Finno-Ugric language, Estonian is not part of the Baltic language family. In contrast Lithuanian is, although Lithuania does not share Estonia's and Latvia's history as part of the Teutonic and Swedish empires, but was instead united for many centuries with Poland in a large commonwealth, stretching as far as to the Black Sea. The common naming of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as the *Baltic* states dates back to the interwar period, when the three countries became independent; Lithuania again after 125 years as part of the Russian

empire preceded by its medieval kingdom and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and Estonia and Latvia for the first time.

This delimitation of the term Baltic to the historical regions, or the three modern states on the southeastern shore of the Baltic Sea, often causes confusion. Plans for a federation of the Baltic states in the form of a Baltic League did not materialise (Lehti 1999), but to some degree structures of cooperation were established in the form of the Baltic Entente (1934). Sharing the same destiny as forced members of the Soviet Union after 1944 cooperation was re-established during the struggle for renewed independence in the 1980s and early 1990s. However, it should be noted that Baltic Sea cooperation goes far beyond the three nations. Neither do the small Baltic states form any kind of core of Baltic Sea cooperation, nor does a distinct Baltic regionalism today have any strong backing in any of the countries. The dual use of the term also renders the concept of 'Baltism' as a term for an ideology behind Baltic Sea cooperation (e. g. Wæver 1992) problematic.

Taking the institutions of Baltic Sea cooperation into consideration opens up another perspective. While the drainage basin would include the whole of Poland and Belarus as well as parts of Ukraine and the Czech Republic, the western half of both Denmark and the German sub-regions would not be part of the region. The same applies to Norway, which geographically turns its back on the region; not to mention Iceland, which is not just not a coastal state, but also situated far out in the North Atlantic Ocean, possessing strong links to the American continent. Nonetheless, these last two countries are member states of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). The reason for their membership is, in particular in the case of Iceland, that they have been part of the Nordic family which had been cooperating since the 1920s, not the least in the framework of the Nordic Council (NC) and the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM). Fearing that they would become marginalised without representation, Norway and Iceland joined the CBSS, even if their involvement in many fora of cooperation is limited.

Without any doubt the nine Baltic Sea littoral states are part of the region: the Nordic countries of Denmark, Sweden and Finland; Germany; Poland; the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; as well as the Russian Federation. However, while for example the small country of Denmark (Denmark proper without the Faroe Islands and Greenland) as a whole can be considered a part of the BSR, it is doubtful whether the same applies to all the territory of the three largest Baltic Sea littoral countries, Germany, Poland, and Russia.

With its vast area bordering China and the Pacific Ocean in the east and southeast and stretching as far as the Black and the Caspian Seas in the south, only a comparably very small part of the Russian Federation is attached to the Baltic Sea. In the first years of Baltic Sea cooperation only Leningrad/St. Petersburg and its surrounding *oblast*, as well as the Kaliningrad Oblast (the former German city of Königsberg and the northern part of the province of East Prussia), were considered to be parts of the BSR. Later, cooperation was widened to include ever larger parts of the country. Today (from 2014) the EU Baltic Sea Region Programme of the European Commission includes the whole Northwestern Federal District of the Russian Federation, which consists of St. Petersburg and its surrounding Leningrad Oblast, the Kaliningrad, Murmansk, Novgorod, Pskov, Arkhangelsk, and Vologda Oblasts, the Karelia and Komi Republics, and the Nenets Autonomous Okrug. The vast extension of this area corresponds to the entire drainage area of the Baltic Sea, and even includes the Barents Euro-Arctic Region.

The same applies to Germany: when new opportunities for regional cooperation emerged from the late 1980s onwards, only the federal state of Schleswig-Holstein, and after German unification in 1990, also Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, became active in Baltic Sea Region politics. It took some years for the Free City of Hamburg, another federal state, to become part of the region, and only recently has the federal state of Brandenburg been involved in Baltic Sea matters. Germany's capital Berlin, a federal state of its own located in the middle of Brandenburg, has not developed any BSR policy. Other federal states, in particular in Southern Germany, have hardly any stake in Baltic Sea politics and cooperation. Germany's federal level also generally keeps a low profile in the BSR.

Poland has had a more Central European orientation during most of its history of coping with Russia, Prussia/Germany and even Austria, the three empires among which the country in the end of the 18th century was partitioned three times until the Polish state finally ceased to exist in 1795. It was re-established in 1918 as a consequence of the three empires' collapses. It was mainly through the westward shift of the country following the Second World War that modern Poland came to possess larger coastal areas, by acquiring parts of a defeated Germany. However, the cities of Gdansk and Szczecin have been important centres of trade in the BSR. After the end of communism, Poland looked west rather than north.

So far, the BSR appears as a territorial entity which comprises a clearly definable area. In fact, understanding the character of the region as a space of cooperation requires a somewhat different perspective. The BSR is a space created by the cooperative structures themselves. Notably the region emerged in a process starting in the late 1980s and developing since while keeping its pragmatic low-profile character. The BSR is first and foremost a functional region, i.e. cooperation is carried out with the aim of tackling and solving certain practical problems and challenges. Its boundaries are shifting depending on the issue at stake and the actors involved (Joenniemi and Stålvant 1995). As a spatial entity, it has no fixed boundaries, but rather consists of several or many overlapping regions (Götz 2016). Any attempt to point out the region on a map must remain vague, and any circle drawn is just a modest suggestion. As far as territorial units (states or sub-regions) are involved in cooperation, the region has a territorial dimension. As far as other types of actors are concerned (e. g. cities, NGOs, enterprises) it is more appropriate to talk about trans-local relations. A certain proximity is implied, but as a functional space, the BSR is not a contiguous area with a clear delineation of the region towards the outside, towards what is not ‘contained’ in it. Neither is all that lies beyond any defined border excluded from the region, nor is everything within this delineation included in it.

3 The Contexts of the Emerging Baltic Sea Region

3.1 The Geopolitical Context

During the Cold War’s East-West divide, the Baltic Sea area was part of the global geopolitical pattern which was shaped by the opposition between the two military blocs: one of them formed by Western capitalist and liberal democratic states under the leadership of the US, the other consisting of communist countries with planned economies led by the Soviet Union. Resulting from this, until the early 1990s the Baltic Sea area was part of the European periphery in two ways.

In terms of security, the northern part of the BSR formed a special sub-system of the global Cold War, which was characterised by a comparably low