

Helsinki, 27-28 September 2012

Section IV: Baltic Sea Region – Views on security challenges and dividing lines

Tobias Etzold\*

**SECURITY IN AND THROUGH REGIONAL COOPERATION  
IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION**

Security, ‘hard’ and soft’, has always been an underlying feature in the development of the Baltic Sea region (BSR). This applies to the Cold War period, in which the region has been divided between the Western and the Eastern blocks with the Iron curtain going right through its centre, as well as the past 23 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Owing to the far reaching and dramatic changes Europe and the region were facing, security was definitely one of the primary concerns on the political agenda of the countries of the region during the 1990s. However, when regional cooperation emerged in the early 1990s, hard and military security did not become an explicit task of those newly established regional cooperation structures. Nonetheless, the regional institutions contributed through their activities, of which many were and still are related to soft security risks, to overall stability and security in the region.

This paper provides a brief overview of developments in the BSR in particular with a view on soft and hard security and analyses what contributions to overall stability, safety and security the regional cooperation structures and the EU have made in the past 20 years. In particular the Northern Dimension (ND) Initiative and the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBBSR) and their contributions will be highlighted in this context. The paper also examines briefly the role of Germany as one of the largest countries of the region as an important factor in stabilizing and desecuritizing the region, in particular in relation to the other big player in the region, Russia. The paper ends with a number of conclusions, observations and future prospects.

**BSR cooperation and security**

Dealing with hard security threats and fostering related cooperation was not a primary task of the regional institutions that emerged in the early 1990s. This highly sensitive field was left to established international organisations with a wider scope, especially NATO, including Partnership for Peace (PfP) and NATO-Russia partnership, and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It was not the intention to create any competition with

*\* Tobias Etzold is Project Leader for Nordic and Baltic Sea Region Studies at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Berlin.*

*On 27th and 28th of September 2012 the fourth German-Nordic-Baltic Forum took place. The conference was entitled “EU Responses to external challenges as seen from Germany, Poland, Nordic and Baltic countries and the EU neighbourhood”. Not only experts from the Baltic States, the Nordic States, Poland and Germany participated in the forum, but for the first time also scientists coming from those countries to which the EU policies are addressed. Thus, a fruitful exchange of ideas and opinions among the stakeholders involved on the contents of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and its perception among the partner states could be achieved.*

*The expert seminar was organised by the Institut für Europäische Politik (IE) in cooperation with the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), Helsinki and took place at the premises of FIIA. The conference was generously supported by the Federal Foreign Office and the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*

existing and established international organisations in security related cooperation. Nonetheless, regional cooperation structures such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) dealt from their start and still deal with security risks in a wider sense, in particular soft security risks such as trafficking, cross-border organized crime, environmental risks through for example hazardous substances and nuclear and radiation safety.

Through their work in general, organizations such as the CBSS, the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), the Baltic Sea States Subregional Cooperation (BSSSC), the Union of Baltic Cities (UBC) and the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) contributed to confidence building and stabilizing and desecuritizing the region. The regional cooperation structures were successful in organizing an active political dialogue among the countries of the region in the early 1990s. This dialogue was very helpful to bring people on very different levels together, to get to know each other and to jointly discuss and find possible solutions to common, not just multilateral but also even bilateral, problems. Building and consequently strengthening mutual understanding, confidence and good neighbourly relations and overall regional stability on that basis were therefore considered as the main achievements of Baltic Sea cooperation in those early years. Later, also more concrete results in specific issue areas such as environment, nuclear and radiation safety and education could be achieved. This way, despite some significant conflict potential in particular between Russia and the Baltic states and an overall uncertainty over the future development of the region and the place of each individual country within it, major conflicts could be prevented in the region.

For the newly independent countries at the Eastern shore of the Baltic Sea, institutions such as the CBSS and the EU's Northern Dimension were significant in developing close ties to the Western countries of the region and bringing them closer to EU and NATO since they were not immediately able to join those organisations. This, however, was their ultimate and primary foreign policy goal. Another important achievement has been Russia's inclusion in regional cooperation. Unlike in the EU and NATO, Russia is an equal partner amongst all other members within the CBSS, HELCOM, BSSSC and other BSR organisations.

Once the Baltic states and Poland had joined EU and NATO in 2004 and 1999 respectively, the latter became the most important security providers in and for the region. EU and NATO accession of these countries, however, also fostered some kind of dividing line within the region, namely between EU/NATO members and Russia. The various efforts to involve and integrate Russia in the region and in regional cooperation and to mitigate this dividing line continue. Russia, however, remains an outsider and a security threat to at least some of the countries of the region. Furthermore, up until enlargement the country showed little interest and (pro-) activism in regional cooperation. This has slightly changed meanwhile and Russia developed a more active approach towards the region and regional cooperation. Nonetheless, the region has not turned into a political priority for Moscow. It will be interesting to see whether Russia will make use of its CBSS Presidency 2012-2013 to put itself down as an active and committed Baltic Sea country. This would be very much welcomed by the other countries of the region.

## **EU and BSR security**

From the late 1990s onwards, when the prospects of EU enlargement in the region started to loom clearer, the EU became more active in the BSR through the Northern Dimension (ND)

Initiative and the ND partnerships (environment, public health and welfare, transport and logistics, culture). These dealt with particular challenges and issues of interest to all the actors in the region, including soft security issues. In the ND and the partnerships, the regional aspirations of Baltic Sea actors met the EU's growing foreign policy ambitions and Russia's enduring great power ambitions.<sup>1</sup> Despite tensions between the EU and Russia, the ND has managed to promote concrete cooperation between the two sides. The ND has been successful in fostering cooperation on low-political issues, avoiding controversial ones, and enhancing direct cooperation with Northwest-Russian regions.<sup>2</sup>

However, despite initiatives such as the ND, the EU's engagement and commitment in the BSR has been rather half-hearted until 2004, leaving the initiative to the EU member states in the BSR. Since EU enlargement of 2004, with all countries of the region but Russia having joined the EU, the EU became more engaged in and committed to regional cooperation in the BSR. The EU recognised the opportunities the region and close regional cooperation has to offer also in a wider European perspective. To this end, the most important initiative has been the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR). This initiative emerged in the European Parliament and has been primarily promoted by Sweden and the European Commission. The EUSBSR's idea was not to create new structures (and new institutions) but rather to exert some sort of framing and coordination function for existing cooperation structures and to streamline efforts to tackle existing problems. The overall goals of the EUSBSR are: making the BSR and the Baltic Sea an environmentally sustainable place; making the region a prosperous place by supporting economic development, removing trade barriers and fostering innovation; creating an accessible and attractive region by improving transport and energy infrastructure.<sup>3</sup> The in the context of wider security most interesting objective of the EUSBSR is to make the BSR a safe and secure place through close cooperation and effective coordination of efforts. To this end, the EUSBSR contains a number of provisions for regional security and safety in a wider sense since the aforementioned soft security risks and problems do continuously exist in the BSR. To the strategy's priority areas belong: dealing with hazardous substances (including organic contaminants, heavy metals and chemical weapons in the sea), maritime safety and security and major emergencies. The latter deals primarily with the economic impact of disasters with cross border effects that may adversely affect the economic growth and competitiveness of EU regions/the BSR.<sup>4</sup> Through these efforts, the EU makes a number of valuable contributions to regional cooperation also in a security and safety perspective.

A certain risk has, however, not been completely eliminated as yet: the EUSBSR could create a new dividing line between EU members and Russia as the latter is not fully included in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Joenniemi, Pertti and Fabrizio Tassinari 'Security', in Bernd Henningsen und Tobias Etzold (eds.), *Political State of the Region Report 2011*, (Copenhagen: Baltic Development Forum, 2011), p. 61, <http://www.bdforum.org/activities/reports-publications/thematic-reports> [last accessed on 16 October 2012]

<sup>2</sup> Hagström Frisell, Eva and Ingmar Oldberg (2009) "*Cool Neighbors*": *Sweden's EU Presidency and Russia*, *Russie.Nei.Visions* n42, IFRI, p. 17, at: [http://www.ifri.org/downloads/ifrirussiaandswedenengune09\\_1.pdf](http://www.ifri.org/downloads/ifrirussiaandswedenengune09_1.pdf) [last accessed on 12 October 2012].

<sup>3</sup> Commission of the European Communities (2009a) *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region*, Brussels, COM(2009) 248/3, p. 3, [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/docoffic/official/communic/baltic/com\\_baltic\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/communic/baltic/com_baltic_en.pdf) [last accessed on 16 October 2012].

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.balticsea-region-strategy.eu/pages/websites> [last accessed on 16 October 2012].

implementation of the strategy. The EUSBSR is an internal EU strategy and aims at strengthening the cooperation and coordination among EU members in the first place. Nonetheless, the strategy also has an external dimension and aims at including Russia in at least parts of the strategy through other channels such as ND and CBSS in which Russia fully participates. Also, Russian partners participate in several projects within the strategy's framework. Russia's involvement in certain policy areas seems important indeed since sustainable solutions for some of the region's major problems, in particular in the field of environment and soft security, cannot be achieved without Russian involvement and engagement. It still does form a particular challenge for the EU to find ways to involve Russia in the implementation of the EUSBSR more closely. Russia was generally positive towards the strategy, provided it will not have a negative effect on already existing cooperation frameworks such as the CBSS and ND. Russia rather welcomed the EU's intention to foster its involvement in BSR cooperation through the strategy.

### **Germany's role and (security) interests in the BSR**

While international and regional cooperation can generally profit from the input of big countries that in many cases have been able to take on a certain leadership role and to move the cooperation on, Germany as one of the biggest countries of the BSR has mostly been a rather reluctant partner in regional cooperation. There are several indications that the German federal government, representing a country right in the centre of Europe, did not have an outstanding political interest in the region for most of the past 20 years. The region was and is only one of many fields within Germany's foreign relations; its foreign policy priorities are different.<sup>5</sup> However, economically, Germany is deeply integrated in the region and is the most prominent trading partner for most of the countries of the BSR.<sup>6</sup> In particular for the German states (*Bundesländer*) with a Baltic Sea coastline the BSR is of outer importance. Even more than the German federal government, they played and still play a pivotal role in regional cooperation on the sub-national level and even beyond.<sup>7</sup> To some extent, Germany has also contributed to the development of the region and regional cooperation. Most prominently, the former German Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, initiated together with his Danish counterpart, Uffe Elleman-Jensen, the launch of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) in 1992. Especially Genscher, however, did not seem interested in turning the CBSS into a strong and influential actor. They rather perceived the body as a symbol for the changes in the region and for building relations between the countries of the region rather than as a motor for cooperation.<sup>8</sup> Germany's reluctance in engaging more vividly in the region was to some extent linked to Germany's special relationship to Russia. The country tried to avoid actions,

---

<sup>5</sup> Tobias Etzold: 'A country on the brink of a region? Germany's Baltic Sea policies', Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. (ed.) *International Reports*, Berlin, May 16, 2012, p. 1, <http://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.31041/> [last accessed on 16 October 2012].

<sup>6</sup> Carsten Schymik, 'Germany', in Bernd Henningsen und Tobias Etzold (eds.), *Political State of the Region Report 2011*, Copenhagen: Baltic Development Forum, 2011, p. 29, <http://www.bdforum.org/activities/reports-publications/thematic-reports> [last accessed on 16 October 2012].

<sup>7</sup> Etzold, as FN 5, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Carl-Einar Stålvant, 'The Council of Baltic Sea States', in Andrew Cottey (Hrsg.) *Subregional cooperation in the new Europe: building security, prosperity and solidarity from the Barents to the Black Sea* (New York: Macmillan, 1999), p. 58.

for instance, a strong engagement in the Baltic states and Kaliningrad<sup>9</sup>, that could have given Russia a sense of a German ambition to play a dominant role in the region, reawakening the still fresh memories about the German past. Bearing this in mind, Germany avoided showing any “great-power ambitions” in or around the BSR.<sup>10</sup> Through this non-active approach, Germany tried to contribute to confidence-building in a rather unusual way. Other countries, in particular the Baltic states, would, however have wished a more pro-active German stance and more German support and back-up.

In safety and security terms, without doubts the BSR has some relevance for Germany. While currently no direct military threat for Germany exists in the region, it is in Germany’s interest to maintain the region stable. Germany, as the other countries of the region, is strongly affected by the region’s soft security risks. Also from a security point of view, sound bilateral relations with Russia and inclusion of Russia in regional cooperation are of particular importance also for Germany. In order to avoid any future major problems and conflicts in the region, it is of importance and should be in Germany’s interest to keep the political dialogue and the close regional cooperation up. During its recent CBSS Presidency, Germany focussed on revitalising and maintaining the political dialogue, putting a strong emphasis on keeping Russia involved, and did a good job in this respect. Beyond its CBSS presidency, Germany should keep this active approach up and remain actively involved in regional cooperation. Germany is needed as a reliable partner in regional affairs. The other (smaller) countries of the region appreciate that Germany as a big member state and important country within the EU shows some presence in the BSR and plays an active role in regional cooperation, making its contribution to creating and maintaining a prosperous, safe and stable region.

## **Conclusions and future prospects**

On average, the BSR became a safer and more secure place through cooperation in areas other than hard/military security. Regional cooperation contributed to confidence-building among the countries of the region and enhanced the region’s stability. However, some kind of security dividing line within the region remains: EU/NATO members versus Russia. Despite various efforts to integrate Russia in the region/regional cooperation and at least some form of commitment and engagement from the Russian side, Russia remains an outsider and a, (theoretical) security threat to at least some of the countries of the region. Germany’s commitment remains an important factor in regional cooperation as the country might be able to mitigate a possible Russian threat due to its special relationship to Russia. Therefore, Germany should continue to play an important role in maintaining the regional political dialogue with Russia. In the near future it will remain important to effectively cooperate with Russia, encouraging the country’s interest and commitment in the BSR and giving the country a sense that its regional involvement is regarded as important by the other countries of the Region. On the other hand, it is not strictly necessary for the other countries of the region to always give in to every Russian sensitivity and demand if this does not serve a wider regional interest. All the other countries of the region should be equally involved in the region and their interests taken equally into account. It would be a wrong signal towards them if the main focus of regional cooperation and dialogue would be on Russia alone. Through initiatives

---

<sup>9</sup> Bernd Henningsen, ‘At the Dawn of German CBSS Presidency: Hopes vs. Doubts’, Opinion article in *Baltinfo - The Official Journal of the Council of the Baltic Sea States*, No 32, October 2000, Stockholm, pp. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Axel Krohn, ‘Germany’, in: Axel Krohn (ed.) *The Baltic Sea Region: National and International Security Perspectives*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1996, p. 96.

such as ND and EUSBSR the EU became an increasingly important actor in regional cooperation and will even more remain relevant in stabilising the BSR and moving regional cooperation on in the future. Also regional institutions such as the CBSS are still needed in order to maintain the regional political dialogue and concrete regional cooperation and to develop and maintain the BSR as a safe, prosperous and stable place.