

“Institutionalising the Baltic Sea as a European Region”

A slightly modified version

“The Future of the Baltic Sea Region in Europe”

Hamina, Finland, August 27-28, 2009.

Esko Antola

Director, Centrum Balticum

What kind of a region?

“Baltic Sea is a notion than anything else” (James Scott, 2002).

Constructivist – functional – territorial

Constructivist regionalisation emphasises common ties from history, cultural communalities of the nations participating in regionalisation, shared knowledge and social and normative institutions. Constructivist regions have a strong element of a self-defined community of interests. Constructivism pays attention to processes how regions are socially constructed and consolidated. The constructivist conceptualisation is a part of an ongoing process of identifying historical regions in Europe. Constructivist thinking dominated the discussion on regionalisation in the Baltic Sea area immediately after the fall of the Cold War.

Functional regionalisation is another dominant school of seeing regions. The philosophy of Baltic Sea region-building has followed the classical functionalist integration idea: once a core area of cooperation has been identified, progress in this area shall bring along spill-over effects and on the other hand, spill-over is needed to keep integration in motion.

The Baltic Sea Region (BSR) has followed the model since mid-1970's in the environmental sector. The core of region-building has been the fight against deteriorating environment. A general understanding and naive but well-meaning expectation has been that environmental challenges would unite the region and consequently bring about spill over effects to other functional areas such as economy for instance.

In spite of a growing public concern of the state of environment of the Baltic Sea has not contributed to great concrete achievements let alone breakthroughs that would lead to spill-over. There seems not to be automatic deepening-widening mechanism in spite of the fact that HELCOM (Helsinki Commission) as an institution to promote environmental collaboration was established already in 1974. It is an intergovernmental institution which produces statements and recommendations. The problem is the implementation, or, rather the lack of implementation.

The current trend in macro-regionalisation is liked to *territorial conceptualisation* of regionalisation. The trend has been from spatial dynamics to territorial dimension. Jönsson et al define territory: a cohesive section of the earth's surface that is distinguished from its surroundings by a boundary". (Jönsson et al, 2003).

This definition is reflected in the Communication of the European Commission on the Baltic Sea Region by defining the Baltic Sea as 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". (COM(2009) 248 final, p.5)

The Next Step: Accept the primacy of politics

The time has come to recognise the primacy of politics in the Baltic Sea Region. If the Region hopes to meet the challenges of the future: the environment, reaching sustainable economic growth, in solving the energy demands, in meeting the security challenges, both national and individual, emphasis on political structures and policy commitments are needed..

Necessary bits and pieces do exist already. There is no lack of good ideas and proposals. As a new step a framework has been outlined as a Baltic Sea Strategy but the challenge remains: *how to get things done?*

Political commitment and leadership are key challenges. The Baltic Sea Region needs, first of all, strong political commitment from the actors, especially the eight EU Member States and their governments.

Definitions of political commitment stress the dedication of political leaders and their leadership. But politics is neither national nor state-dominated any more. States and governments are not enough in the process of commitment. The region should take steps towards a political space. The concept of a political space would invite the political forces to enhance trans-boundary cooperation.

Political Space as an action arena

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).

Who are the “skilled actors”? They are not only the States and Governments. They are political forces, companies and private interests, civil society actors, sub-national regions, cities. This perspective is open for any type of actors in the making and the application of any type of rules of a political order.

Political Space does not operate without institutions. This view contracts the European Commission doctrine in the Baltic Sea Strategy: No new institutions! But institutions need not to be format or state organisations. institutions are also “*socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels*”. (Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky , 2003). Institutions refer to networks, agreements, rules of behaviour, reciprocity and mutual commitments.

The 1990’s saw a mushrooming of organisations and networks, public and private with the main purpose of socialisation of the new market economies into the Western European structures and indeed, to the 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 1990’s has deteriorated, even made obsolete by the events.

The region should aim at constantly evaluating the existing network of institutions and consider carefully the establishment of new instruments. New institutions for extensive collaboration are not the answer. But making better use of existing ones could be a step towards increasing commitment and enabling States to use their combined weight and voice.

Merging state-centred and informal structures

The challenge in creating a Baltic Sea political Space is how to bring the formal (state-related) institutions and informal institutions together. In practise this calls for answers to questions how to open ways to relevant actors to contribute to agenda setting in the Baltic Sea Region? How to strengthen

commitment and ownership, how to create and empower “an action arena” where “skilled actors” try to “identify the specific structure of their interactions” is not adequately present. There is a need for greater possibilities for bottom-up participation,

The inter-state structure is already in place. There exist three sets of governmental - parliamentary setups for agenda setting:

The Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) - The Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC)

The Nordic Council of Ministers – the Nordic Council and

Baltic Council of Ministers – Baltic Assembly.

The three two-dimensional policy forums constitute the backbone of the Baltic Sea Political Space.

The challenge of state-related institutions is to make *weakly enforced Baltic Sea Institutions into effective instruments of agenda setting and policy implementation*. Reforms and adjustments of existing institutions are needed.

But where are for instance trans-boarder party affiliations in shaping the agenda of political space? One could expect 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 to some extent and bilateral contacts between the national parties exist. But common Baltic Sea agenda of political forces does not exist. Consequently nationally defined election agendas still dominated the European Parliament elections of 2009

Currently implications of the global economic crisis have brought to the political agenda national priorities and national strategies for survival. This does not encourage the emergence of trans-border party affiliation or

agendas.

From multi-level to collective governance

Multi-level governance concept, a dominant doctrine of today, suggests that although governments are not the only relevant actors they are in any case key actors that matter. The concept rests on an implicit hierarchisation of space that constitutes governance. Multi-level governance means by definition “relationships between, and the interdependence of, governments and non-governmental organizations and agencies. This approach seeks to locate the formal institutions of government alongside, but also within, more complex forms of networked governance.”(John Allen and Allan Cochrane).

Political Space calls for new forms of governance. They must fuse the traditional *governance through states* –models and *transnational action arena* structures into a new Baltic Sea Governance. The new governance is a collective governance rather than based on a multi-level hierarchy. Collective governance as a concept reflects the existing reality where civil society participation networks and the activities of sub-national entities have been followed by an increasing participation of private interest actors.

Further Challenges

Speaking with one voice

The one voice –doctrine works to two directions: to the outside world, in particular to the adjacent regions and other emerging mega-regions and to the EU decision-making. Globalised world governance has endowed regional governance in general. The region has to recognise the value to be able to

speaking out its interests and ensure that that the voice is heard in global restructuring: “G-sation” demands common voice.

A natural dimension of speaking with one voice consists of European institutions. In the Union, in future consisting of perhaps over 30 member states, the power of a mega-region depends on its ability to speak with one voice in issues which are important enough to be addressed as common concern.

The one voice –argument loses much of its relevance if political coordination at the level of political forces is nonexistent. A vision of the Baltic Sea Region must include the shaping of a Baltic Sea Region European Agenda at the earliest convenience by the region itself.

Constructing identity

The European Parliament has established a working group of eminent historians to consider the possibilities to furnish the debate how to find a consensus of the main lines of European history. Could it be possible to propose something similar for the Baltic Sea?

Incorporating adjacent areas

The European Union has established policies covering adjoining areas of the Baltic Sea area (Strategy to Russia and the PCA, Neighbourhood Policy, Northern Dimension Action Plan and programs for the Arctic Region). External dimension of the Baltic Sea Strategy is recognised in strategy documents in reference to Northern Dimension. There is a threat that the external dimension is not going to be adequately reflected in the EU Strategy.

Politically the most challenging issue is the relationship to Russia. Kaliningrad Oblast, for instance, is in physical terms inside the European Union yet outside the Baltic Sea Strategy. Is the Baltic Sea Strategy drawing a new line of demarcation or shall it offer a role for Russia as well is an inevitable question that the Region faces? On the other hand, Russia faces a similar challenge: is the Baltic Sea just a transit route for important exports (oil and gas in particular), or should it be seen as a region where Russia has a regional interest and where it sees herself as a participant?

There are concrete areas where the presence of Russia would help to address common Baltic Sea issues: (maritime policy, environmental policy issues, energy matters and transport issues). Russia's self reflection of herself as a Great Power makes very difficult to expect Russia taking unilateral actions of adaptation. Persuading Russia is therefore a highly difficult policy task.