

Germany and the Baltic Sea region: political and security interests

Recommendations for the policy-makers

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Tobias Etzold works partly as a freelance researcher and is chairman of the Berlin-based Forum Northern European Politics. Between 2011 and 2018, he worked as research associate and head of the *Research Centre Norden* at the *German Institute for International and Security Affairs* (SWP) in Berlin. He focuses his research on regional cooperation (Norden and the Baltic Sea area), the Nordic-German relations, Nordic-EU relations and the Arctic.

Contact: etzold_tobias@hotmail.com

Abstract

Germany has contributed to the development of the Baltic Sea region (BSR) and regional cooperation by, for example, initiating the launch of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) in 1992 together with Denmark. Still, Germany appeared as a rather reluctant but at least pragmatic partner in regional cooperation across the Baltic Sea for most of the time. Economically, Germany is deeply integrated in the region and is a prominent trading partner for most of the countries of the BSR but politically it has been punching below its weight. While for Germany's federal level the Baltic Sea region has been only one of many foreign policy areas, the region has been and still is much more relevant for the German states (*Bundesländer*) with a Baltic Sea coastline. They engage more vividly in regional cooperation within the range of their possibilities. To some extent, Germany's role in the region has changed throughout the years in particularly in the realm of security. Until 2014, the country was reluctant to play a more pronounced role in the region in security terms. Its main intention was to involve Russia in regional cooperation on equal terms. However, its stance towards Russia has become more critical and distanced since the start of the crisis around Ukraine and Crimea in 2014. Since then, Germany has become more visible as a supportive security actor and is more perceived as such by the other countries of the region. To retain this perception, Germany needs a coherent long-term national strategy for the Baltic Sea region both in political as well as security terms.

Key words

Germany, Baltic Sea region, regional policies and cooperation, Council of the Baltic Sea States, hard and soft security, changes in attitudes and perceptions

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1. German political interests and engagement in the Baltic Sea region

Germany experienced fundamental changes from the late 1980s onwards, culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and reunification in 1990. Around this time, several German actors promoted cooperation in the Baltic Sea region (BSR), a region that was in the process of reunification after having been divided for 40 years, as well as a strong German engagement and commitment in this process. In the initial phase of developing practical cooperation, sub-state actors and individuals acted as driving forces. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, German think tanks had explored the possibilities of cooperation in the BSR. The *Denkfabrik Schleswig-Holstein*, for example, was behind the plans of Björn Engholm, the then social-democratic Prime Minister of the Northern German state of Schleswig-Holstein, to establish a sub-regional non-statist *Baltic Sea Council* or *Baltic Forum*. Inspired by the concept of the medieval Hanseatic League it aimed at setting up a forum in which actors representing sub-state units around the Baltic Sea, parliaments, NGOs and societal groups could gather (Williams 2005, p. 15-16, and Stålvant 1999, p. 56). Although the exact nature of such a council remained undefined, it would have been rather different from the traditional design of inter-state cooperation. The then Federal Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, however, was opposed to Engholm's plan as this would have contradicted the federal government's primacy in foreign policies (*ibidem*).

Together with his Danish colleague Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, Genscher instead revealed plans to enhance regional cooperation in a more traditional format by establishing a regional intergovernmental organisation. Consequently, the foreign ministers of the nine Baltic Sea littoral states plus Norway and a representative from the European Commission gathered in Copenhagen in March 1992 and inaugurated the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) on the basis of the Copenhagen Declaration. The Council was to serve as a driving force behind political and economic stabilisation and cooperation in the new Baltic Sea region (Genscher and Ellemann-Jensen 2002, p. 2).

However, the BSR did not become a political priority for the federal German government during the 1990s. Instead, Germany's interest and activism in general BSR cooperation and the CBSS was fairly limited. Germany rather focussed on the development of the EU, the EU expansion process, relations to other big countries and good bilateral relations with its direct neighbours to the east, especially Poland and Russia. There also was a certain general scepticism by German governments against a strong institutionalised regionalism located in between the national and the European level (Elo 2014, p. 100).

Germany perceived the CBSS primarily 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 (Stalvant 1999, p. 58). Therefore, the federal government did not intend to establish a highly institutionalised and bureaucratised body (Waeber 1997, p. 305) with, for instance, a permanent secretariat (Krohn 1998, p. 12) which some other countries intended to inaugurate and that was eventually established in Stockholm in 1998. Germany did also not assume the CBSS Presidency in these first years, because, as one of the largest member states, it did not wish to impose itself on the other countries of the region (Schultheiß 1999, p. 30).

The reluctance in engaging more vividly in the region was also linked to Germany's special relationship to Russia. The country was keen to avoid actions, for instance, a strong engagement in the Baltic states and Kaliningrad (Henningesen 2000, p. 4-5) that could have given Russia a sense of German ambitions to play a dominant role in the region, reawakening the still fresh memories about the German past also in other countries of the region. Bearing this in mind, Germany avoided exposing any "great-power ambitions" in or around the BSR (Krohn 1996, p. 96).

On the other hand, the Northern German states, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Schleswig-Holstein, were more actively interested and engaged in BSR cooperation and played and still play a pivotal role in regional cooperation on the sub-national level and even beyond. They were recognising their potential of functioning as a vital link between the regional, domestic and European levels early on (Krohn 1998, p. 13). The three states supported the work of the CBSS and were actively engaged in the Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation (BSSSC). Several cities along the German Baltic Sea coast participate in the Union of Baltic Cities (UBC).

Only from 2000 onwards, also the interest and the engagement in regional cooperation of the federal government slightly increased, possibly triggered by the concrete prospects of four Baltic Sea littoral countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) to join the EU. Despite the continuous lack of a coherent German Baltic Sea policy, Germany's first CBSS Presidency (2000-2001) indicated at least some good will and a more active approach (Williams 2001, p. 31). This was testified by a number of high-level intergovernmental meetings, (academic) conferences and cultural events organised by the presidency. The German Presidency continued Norwegian efforts to develop the CBSS into the key coordinator of intergovernmental cooperation efforts in the region, emphasised the complementary character of EU and CBSS activities and specified the CBSS's role within the Northern Dimension (ND) of the EU (Heimsoeth 2001, p. 2). Germany also underlined the importance of involving civil society actors in BSR cooperation by initiating and co-organising the first official Baltic Sea NGO forum under the auspices of the CBSS in Lübeck in May 2001. Also the protection of the marine environment was a priority area for the German Presidency as well as for general German Baltic Sea related activities.

But even then, overall the German government was still criticised for low ambitions as well as little enthusiasm and engagement in the CBSS. Most CBSS ministerial meetings were attended by Foreign Office junior ministers instead of the foreign minister. Cabinet ministers instead of the federal chancellor attended most of the Baltic Sea States Summits of heads of government. The German CBSS Presidency's priority list only contained the usual topics without any visible effect, major surprises, innovations and inspiration. Despite good intentions, the German position in intergovernmental BSR cooperation was characterised by lots of rhetoric but little action (Henningesen 2000, p. 4-5).

2. Germany and the post-enlargement Baltic Sea region

As EU and NATO expansion was central for Germany, it also influenced the country's attitude and interest towards the BSR. For the German government, enlargement even implied chances for Baltic Sea cooperation. The then German Foreign Minister Fischer believed that real Baltic Sea cooperation would only start effectively after EU enlargement (Deutscher Bundestag 2001, p. 14713). He did, however, not specify whether this would and should happen within the CBSS and other regional organisations or rather within an EU context. German government officials confirmed Germany's interest and commitment in official statements: "Germany encourages the CBSS to use all its comparative advantages to take new initiatives as well as to support the implementation of EU regional policies" (von Alvensleben 2004, p. 11). By this token, Germany believed in the BSR's potential and wished to participate as much as possible in its future development, enhancing economic and political cooperation (*ibidem*). German government officials also repeatedly stressed that the structures of the CBSS should remain light, adaptable and demand-oriented (Bury 2003). The then Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier confirmed Germany's interest in the BSR, the CBSS as well as general regional cooperation and networking. He explicitly stated that he wants the CBSS to continue as a unique forum for exchange around the Baltic Sea (Auswärtiges Amt 2008). The German government supported the reform process in the CBSS that became necessary after the fundamental changes in the region, altering also the pre-conditions for the work of the Council. It made a few specific proposals for the contents of future more project- and result-oriented cooperation, for example elaborating a maritime policy including a fully functioning regional maritime economy as a potential growth sector (Balticness 2008, p. 13) and to establish related working and expert groups.

There was, however, also some scepticism towards post-enlargement regional cooperation and Germany's role within it among government officials. Some did not perceive the BSR as an area that should be a specific focus of German foreign policies. Their main argument was that a distinctive German

Baltic Sea policy is not required, as all the requirements for regional cooperation could be sufficiently fulfilled within the EU and NATO (Schumacher 2007, p. 8).

In the context of the EU becoming a more active player in the BSR of its own, Germany overall supported the elaboration of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) as from 2008 onwards and its subsequent implementation starting in 2010. While taking the responsibility for several priority/policy areas of which the strategy consists, the country took its share of the burden. Compared to in particular the Nordic countries, the German commitment in the EUSBSR remained, however, overall fairly modest (Schymik 2011, p. 30). This at least applies to the federal government that only took the responsibility for one policy area, natural zones and biodiversity. In particular, the federal government was critical of the fact that the EUSBSR was designed as an internal strategy to the EU, meaning that Russia would not be involved as a partner in the strategy on equal terms (Zawilska-Florczyk 2011, p. 3). Therefore it focussed more on regional intergovernmental formats in which Russia was included on equal terms with the other countries such as the CBSS and the environmental Helsinki Commission (HELCOM).

On the other hand, the three states of Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Hamburg, contributed actively to the elaboration of the EUSBSR and were involved in its implementation from the start. In fact, although accepting some sort of coordination role among the involved German actors, the federal government left the implementation of the strategy to the sub-national level (Zawilska-Florczyk 2011, pp. 1 and 7). The coordination of the strategy's priority areas education and tourism has been assigned to the state governments of Hamburg and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania respectively. Through the strategy, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania became politically more visible and active in the BSR (Schymik 2011, p. 30). Hamburg developed a proactive approach toward the BSR, regarding itself as an integral part of the region, fulfilling the function of a major maritime transport hub between the Baltic and other seas. Hamburg naturally focuses on trade and transport in the BSR but also on cultural exchange (*ibidem*). Schleswig-Holstein with its strong track record of regional activity initiated the inauguration of the priority/policy area "Culture" in 2013, dealing with the common culture and cultural identity of the BSR, and took on the role of priority area coordinator jointly with Poland.

Germany's interest, engagement and commitment in the BSR, and the CBSS especially, received a boost during its CBSS Presidency in 2011/12. Germany, as the country that had co-initiated the launch of the CBSS, assumed the Presidency in the year of its 20th anniversary which was commemorated at various occasions across the country. The federal government emphasised the Council as the most important political cooperation structure in the BSR (Etzold 2013, p. 24). The German Presidency intended to make the CBSS strong and fit for the future so that it will be able to remain "a pioneer of regional cooperation" and a "symbol of the regional identity" (Auswärtiges Amt 2011).

Germany's active presidency and related commitment to regional activities have been much appreciated by its partners around the Baltic Sea. In particular the Baltic Sea Days in Berlin in April 2012, including the Baltic Sea NGO Forum and several high-level meetings, and the Baltic Sea Summit of heads of government in Stralsund in May 2012 strengthened the impression that Germany perceives itself as an integral part of the region. These events also contributed to BSR branding and gave proof of a potential to increase the awareness of the region among the German public, politics and media (Etzold 2012, p. 2). The priorities of the German Presidency covered the five long-term priority areas of the CBSS as decided during the CBSS reform summit in Riga in 2008: economic development, environment and sustainability; energy and energy security; education and culture, and civil security and the human dimension. One of its major outputs was a political declaration on energy security in the BSR. Additionally, Germany put an emphasis on the South Eastern Baltic Sea region, including Kaliningrad, striving for modernisation through cooperation. In order to be able to conduct tangible and innovative projects, primarily with a focus on small and medium enterprises and public-private partnerships, a CBSS project fund and a credit line of Euro 100 million have been established by the German Bank for Reconstruction and its Russian counterpart. Another priority for the German Presidency was the creation of a "coherent framework for cooperation" in the region, linking the various structures of Baltic Sea cooperation more closely together and striving for better coordination of activities and a "smart division of labour" (Etzold 2012, pp. 2-3). The German CBSS Presidency has done a valuable effort in this respect by starting a discussion and consultation process which however has not been followed up consequently later on neither by Germany nor the following CBSS Presidencies. It can overall be assumed that the German Presidency has achieved its goals and revitalised and strengthened the regional political dialogue. In this the adequate inclusion and integration of Russia has been of particular relevance for Germany, reflecting its most important political interest and priority in the BSR throughout the years (Elo 2014, p. 99 and 104).

3. Germany and political cooperation in the BSR after 2014

While the federal level's engagement in the BSR somewhat decreased again after handing over the presidency to Russia, it still remained committed to the regional political dialogue including Russia and overall cooperation. But strongly affected by the events in Ukraine the political situation in the region changed dramatically after 2014, putting the only just revitalised and strengthened political dialogue including Russia on hold. Since the crisis in EU/Western - Russian relations, Germany took a more reluctant but simultaneously pragmatic stance towards Baltic Sea cooperation and the way of dealing with Russia. With the Nordic states Germany shares the view that the countries of the region should use clear and frank words towards Russia but keep dialogue channels open and attempt at finding ways to cooperate where ever possible and necessary at the same time (Auswärtiges Amt 2018). The German government overall supported the continued organisation of CBSS ministerial meetings but did not push for them respecting the wishes of the Baltic countries in particular and agreeing that "business as usual" would not have been an adequate answer in the current circumstances. From a German point of view, meetings would have to have an added value for all involved partners. In the end, no meetings of foreign ministers as well as heads of states took place within a CBSS context between 2013 and 2017. Germany supported the continuation of functional and technical cooperation for example in the framework of several CBSS task forces and expert groups as well organisations such as HELCOM including Russian actors. Also the parliamentary (Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference) and sub-national cooperation (BSSSC and UBC) as well as several issues-specific networks and projects continued with Russian participation.

The political dialogue slowly picked up again when the Icelandic CBSS Presidency invited to a special meeting of foreign ministers to Reykjavik commemorating the 25th anniversary of the CBSS in June 2017. The German government hailed this opportunity and attended the gathering in person of then Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel. Gabriel hoped that this would be a new start for and an opportunity to promote the regional dialogue and cooperation including Russia (Auswärtiges Amt 2017b). Revitalising the cooperation within the CBSS would be "an important step towards rebuilding lost trust in the Baltic Sea region" (*ibidem*). Indeed, the foreign ministers and high-level representatives agreed on the need to maintain and strengthen the role of the CBSS and to restore confidence and understanding across the region (CBSS 2017). Around the same time, at the opening of the EUSBSR Annual Forum in Berlin on 13 June 2017, Gabriel stated that "we should focus on exploring opportunities for cooperation in the Baltic Sea region, especially with the neighbours with whom our political relations are currently difficult" (Auswärtiges Amt 2017a). He remained positive that close regional cooperation with Russia is continuously possible (*ibidem*).

The German government supported plans, as agreed in Reykjavik, to launch a so-called Vision Group (Group of Wise Persons) with the task to draft proposals and recommendations for a vision for the BSR beyond 2020 as well as the future role of the CBSS and the means to expand its impact as a forum for political dialogue and practical cooperation. The Group underlined in particular the need for both a continued and even strengthened political dialogue including regular high-level political meetings as well as concrete result-oriented project-based cooperation (Council of the Baltic Sea States 2018a).¹ At another CBSS ministerial meeting in Stockholm in June 2018, foreign ministers or their representatives stressed the importance of the CBSS remaining a vehicle to build trust and confidence in the region and welcomed the Vision Group's report as a good basis for further discussions and considerations for reforming and strengthening the CBSS (Council of the Baltic Sea States 2018b). The current Latvian and the consequent Danish CBSS Presidencies have been tasked to develop more concrete proposals for future activities as well as structures. On the basis of the Vision Group's report, the Latvian Government drafted a road map for CBSS reforms at another ministerial meeting in Latvia in June 2019. The plan prioritises to shape more focus and flexibility in the work of the CBSS, to further improve the cooperation between the CBSS and other regional fora and formats as well as to enable tangible results in which the organisation is uniquely suited to add value (Council of the Baltic Sea States 2019).

However, currently it remains unclear what can and will be achieved in concrete terms and whether it really will be possible to restore trust in the region. Considering the ongoing militarisation of the BSR (see below), in particular Sigmar Gabriel's hopes (see above) might several of the other countries of the region. While several CBSS member states were represented by their foreign ministers at these recent high-level meetings, both Germany as well as Russia only sent their local ambassadors. This might indicate that the interest in the organisation on the highest political official and level and the value the German government attaches to the CBSS as well as some other formats of regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea area, is

¹ Each member state as well as the European Commission appointed an expert into the Group. It consisted of women and men representing diplomacy, politics, academia and civil society. Germany was represented by its Ambassador to Sweden.

not as high as some statements may make believe. It somehow underlines the occasional contradiction between words and actions that has characterised Germany's Baltic Sea approach throughout the years.

4. Germany's stance in soft and hard security matters in the Baltic Sea region

The security situation in the Baltic Sea region has undergone significant changes since 2014. A region that has been characterised by peaceful transformation and cooperation among its countries since the early 1990s started to face new military threats and as a consequence a new military build-up.²

In terms of hard security, Germany has hardly been visibly in the BSR since the early 1990s. It rather showed a "friendly disinterest" as well as little of a strategic approach in regional security policies. The country's security policy was mainly based on an east-west axis, neglecting somewhat Europe's northern and southern margins (Major 2017, p. 24). After completion of NATO and EU enlargement with BSR countries in 2004, which Germany supported, it considered the region's security problems solved (Eellend 2016). From a German point of view, stronger military engagement and an increased NATO presence on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea would just confirm Russia's fears of being encircled. This stance is illustrated by German armed forces being only to a very small extent involved in NATO exercises in the region such as Steadfast Jazz in 2013 (Gotkowska 2016, p. 2).

Germany's rather passive approach towards security in the region has changed since 2014 as has its security policy in general. Now, the German government perceives Russia less as a partner but, like most of the other countries of the region, increasingly as a challenge to European security. Various speeches by high-ranking German politicians at the Munich Security conference in 2014 expressed Germany's determination to take on a larger share of the responsibility for international security. The so-called Munich consensus also was the conceptual starting point for Germany's increasingly pronounced role as a security actor in the BSR (Engelmann and Matlé 2018, p. 38). Especially the "White Paper 2016 on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr" gives proof of this development. It identifies a new direction for German security policy, "in which Germany's strong economic position implies responsibility and in which national interests, such as security, have a role alongside values as motivation for behaviour on the international stage" (Eelend 2016). The country now also shows a willingness to not just participate in international military operations but also to initiate and lead them (*ibidem*). This might particularly be required from Germany in the BSR, where Western leading military powers such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom and France do not have many vital interests (Bruns cited in Sprenger 2019). The Baltic Sea region forms a special challenge for the German armed forces because here homeland defence and the defence of allies overlap (*ibidem*). For Germany, "the Baltic Sea has grown to a never-seen strategic significance in the past years" (Vice Admiral Andreas Krause cited in Sprenger 2019).

Now, the German Navy is more than ever focussing its activities on the Baltic Sea. That the eastern area of the Baltic Sea becomes a venue for conflicts of interests and provocations is regarded as possible. This would require a regular and permanent presence of operational forces and a resolute military build-up (German Foreign Policy 2017). The navy started investing in new material. The navy and other parts of the Bundeswehr take part in Baltic Sea military exercises while, however, mostly only contributing small units to them. It marks its presence without emphasising it strongly (Gotkowska, p. 5). There is also scepticism about large-scale land exercises on the eastern flank. Berlin perceives them as an unnecessary show of force that could be interpreted as provocation (*ibidem*).

In accordance with its obligations and the NATO Readiness Action Plan adopted at the NATO summit in Wales in July 2014, Germany took on a role in securing NATO's eastern flank (Eellend 2016). The country played an active part in reinforcing NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission over the Baltic states and has increased its presence at the upgraded Multinational Corps North East in Szczecin in Poland, a headquarters within NATO's command structure. Germany also played a lead role in developing NATO's *Very High Readiness Joint Task Force* (VJTF), serving as one of six framework nations during 2015 and again in 2019. Germany is also part of the informal Northern Group³ that facilitates defence cooperation in wider Northern Europe aiming at bridging the gap between NATO-members and non-members in the region. New headquarters in the city of Rostock are under construction that will operate not only as a command for the German Navy but also as a NATO Command Structure. The multinational Baltic Maritime Component Command will host officers from other NATO and EU member states and facilitate the coordination of activities. In

² For a comprehensive overview of security related changes in the BSR since 2014 see for example: Centrum Balticum's policy brief "Russia and the security in the Baltic Sea region" by Justyna Gotkowska and Piotr Szymanski of 2017.

³ Other members are the United Kingdom that initiated the forum, the Nordic and Baltic countries, Poland and the Netherlands.

case of a crisis, it could command multinational operations involving all western navy vessels in the Baltic Sea on behalf of NATO and/or the EU (Siebold 2018).

At its summit in Warsaw in July 2016, NATO decided to deploy a so-called Enhanced Forward Presence in the form of battalion-sized battle groups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. As its so far biggest contribution to security building in the BSR, Germany serves as the framework nation in Lithuania since 2017 providing about 450 troops that rotate every six months. Germany was particularly keen on preserving the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 according to which no NATO troops should be based in NATO's most Eastern member states on a permanent basis (Engelmann and Matlé 2018, p. 35). In addition, unlike troops from other countries at place the German troops based in Lithuania are officially on a training mission, every combat operation would have to be approved by the German Parliament. On this basis, Germany remains very much committed to the concept of deterrence, showing but not actually using its military power (*ibidem*, p. 43).

The recent developments and Germany's growing military activities have fostered confidence in particularly in the Baltic countries that Germany will be of assistance and show support in the event of a crisis as a leader and not just as a follower (Eelend 2016). Germany has gradually expanded its military presence in Poland and the Baltic states also in order to maintain its credibility within the alliance (Gotkowska 2016, p. 2). German political leaders have assured the Baltic countries and Poland of their solidarity and support at various occasions since 2014 (see for example Engelmann and Matlé 2018, p. 38-41). Germany is now perceived as a more active and committed security player by the other countries of the region. Since 2014, "Germany's status has evolved from that of 'big absent one' on NATO's eastern flank to that of a state with major involvement in the Baltic Sea region" (Gotkowska 2016, p. 4).

But Germany's new engagement also bears major challenges for the German forces and politics. As it has been down-sized over a long period of time, the German Navy in particular is challenged by an unsustainable force structure trajectory, hampering modernisation, readiness, recruitment and operations and therefore finds itself under significant pressure (Bruns 2016). The German Government became increasingly aware that the Navy is overstretched and underfunded (*ibidem*). The German army's lack of resources and the urgent need for modernisation became and remains a problem for its international partners since it could have implications on Germany's reliability. To this adds that while having responded with substantial material and political commitments to NATO, the EU and to multilateral and bilateral cooperation formats, Germany has also irritated regional partners with contradictory decisions at times (Major and von Voss 2016, p. 6). Berlin's continued support for construction of the gas pipeline Nord Stream 2, running from Russia to the German Baltic Sea coast near Greifswald and pumping Russian gas straight to Germany, is a case in point. Berlin used to regard the project as a purely economic one. It has not been discussed within a security context (Gotkowska 2016, p. 7). Most other countries of the region, however, have expressed their concerns on the pipeline which they perceive as a security risk. It therefore seemed at times that the German government did not fully understand the security concerns of the other smaller countries of the region since it had a somewhat different perception of the situation and did not perceive Russia as a military threat for a long time.

Germany's hard security related actions in the region since 2014 go hand in hand with soft power related activities to support the Baltic countries and enhance security and safety in the region. As early as 2015, the German government signed bilateral agreements with each of the three Baltic countries to counter hybrid threats. The countries intended closer cooperation related to energy, civil society, education, culture and placed a special focus on media and communication. Like also the Nordic countries individually and through the institutions of Nordic cooperation, Germany supports efforts to promote independent and objective media operating in Russian language in the Baltic countries in order to counter Russian propaganda. Germany is also supportive of soft security related activities in the framework of Baltic Sea cooperation, for example CBSS and the EUSBSR. These include building up crisis management capacities, civil security, fighting organised crime and trafficking, combating contagious communicable diseases and enhancing nuclear and radiation safety. But those activities have been initiated by other countries, for example Sweden taking an active role. Germany's engagement in such activities on the regional level and its specific role as a soft security provider remain limited (Schmidt-Felzman and Barzanje 2018, p. 191).

In sum, although Germany has raised its profile as a regional security provider since 2014 both in terms of hard as well as soft power, doubts remain "whether or not Germany has the necessary resources as well as the political will to maintain and expand its military engagement in the region, thereby becoming a central security actor..." (Engelmann and Matlé 2018, p. 43). Nonetheless, Germany has the opportunity and according to some even the obligation to contribute more to securing the BSR (Schmidt-Felzmann and Barzanje 2018, p. 206). At least, Germany has started an effort to meet these expectations.

5. Conclusions, outlook and recommendations

Germany as an important player in political and practical regional cooperation

Owing to diverging views, Germany's real interest in the Baltic Sea region both in political as well as security terms is hard to pinpoint at times. Overall, for most of the time Germany's position in the region is well characterised by the assumption that the country "is playing a role within the region but prefers not to draw too much attention to its actions". In addition, being linked to the region in many ways, Germany "is present - but not visible" (Henningsen cited in Schumacher 2007, p. 6). Lacking an explicit BSR policy and long-term regional agenda and strategy, Germany appeared to be a rather dispassionate participant in regional cooperation, politically punching below its weight (Schymik 2011, p. 31). Indeed, Germany has supported many institutions and activities across the region but did not actually initiate and lead them, appearing as rather passive. The federal government's Baltic Sea engagement was the highest when it twice was in charge of the CBSS Presidency. Then the region was more present on Germany's political agenda than usual. This way a particular lack of continuity becomes apparent. But behind the scenes Germany seems to have played an important diplomatic role more often, for example within the CBSS in particular in the difficult times after 2014. It did attempts to reconcile the diverging interests of the countries of the region. They wish for an engaged Germany that can also lead the way in political and diplomatic terms when required.

Thus, as one of the largest countries in the region, Germany with its political and economic power potential and weight still has an important role to play in the development of the region and regional cooperation. Owing to its close political, economic and security links to the region, it would be in Germany's own interest to develop a more sustainable, uniform, explicit and long-term policy and perhaps even strategy towards the region covering all relevant policy areas and structures of Baltic Sea cooperation. To this also belongs high-level attendance of the German federal government at BSR meetings such as CBSS ministerials as an important signal of commitment to the partner countries. If the regional organisations such as the CBSS are to create added value for their members, it is up to them to show interest and commitment and to make an active contribution to the success of regional cooperation.

Furthermore, it is important not to focus too strongly and one-sidedly on individual countries in the region and not to lose the bigger picture out of sight. In the past, Germany's sometimes one-sided focus on Russia was a problem for several partner countries. As this has already changed since 2014, it now is equally important that Germany in agreement and cooperation with the other countries engages Russia in a pragmatic way in regional cooperation whenever possible and of added value to all involved parties.

Also a more systematic and structured involvement of sub-national, local and civil society actors is needed. This does not just apply to Germany but also to the other countries of the region. But owing to its federal structure and since the German states already play an important role in regional policies, it is of particular importance there that the BSR related activities of both the federal government and the states are better linked and coordinated with each other. An efficient division of labour is required, providing the *Länder* also with the necessary political leeway to deploy their activities without putting any strains on them.

There is in particular some potential for this in the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region which overall is met with more interest and commitment on the subnational than the central level. It would therefore be logical to shift decision-making powers more systematically from top to bottom, for example, by sub-national actors representing their country in macro-regional steering bodies (a practice already established within the EU Alpine Region strategy) (Etzold 2018, p. 4). Opportunities for civil-society actors to participate should also be further defined and expanded in Germany as well as the other BSR EU member states (*ibidem*). But a stronger commitment to the implementation of the strategy by the federal government would also help the strategy's progress and success. If the strategy will be more firmly embedded in the work of federal ministeries, regional issues could be introduced and more efficiently promoted in the relevant EU ministerial councils.

Germany as an important actor in regional security

The assessments of observers regarding Germany's stance on security matters in the BSR diverge. Despite recent developments and the overall more active approach towards security, several observers still maintain that Germany lacks a clear vision and strategy for the region and Europe vis-a-vis the East. They consider the Baltic Sea region to be the missing piece in the German foreign policy discourse (Kuusik 2018). Others already suggest that Germany has significantly increased its security presence in the region

(Spruds and Vizgunova 2018, p. 215), that “Germany is now back in the Baltic Sea – in a big way” and that the country’s new role in the region is to stay (Eellend 2016). By most countries in the region, Germany is perceived as a like-minded partner in relation to international affairs as well as common European values and institutions as well as a vital ‘counterbalance’ to Russia (Spruds and Vizgunova 2018, pp. 208 and 214). Most countries agree on the notion that “the Baltic Sea region would benefit from a clear vision for European security from Germany, including support to the transatlantic relationship and a coherent and realistic foreign policy towards Russia and our eastern neighbours” (Kuusik 2018).

In order to make this happen, Germany would not just require a coherent and consistent political long-term strategy for the BSR as outlined above. It would also need a security strategy defining clearly its place in the military domain (see also (Spruds and Vizgunova 2018, p. 217). Such a strategy would have to outline Germany’s military objectives in the region clearly and precisely, taking realistically into account what Germany is able to contribute to regional defence and security cooperation. An important pre-condition for elaborating such strategies in an effective way is that the BSR becomes more of a political long-term priority as well as an issue of wider discussions in Germany’s relevant policy-making circles. So far, only very few individuals in the relevant ministries, the federal Parliament (Bundestag) and thinktanks have a genuine interest in the Baltic Sea region as well as a profound knowledge of its peculiarities as well as most of the other countries of the region.

Germany should take the security concerns and needs of the smaller states in the Baltic Sea region more seriously in a long-term perspective. The German Government should also take the wish of particularly the Baltic countries more seriously for German leadership as a responsible lead nation in security operations across the Baltic Sea (see also Bruns 2016). On the other hand, those countries that are calling for a more advanced and active German role in the region need to clarify what they precisely expect from Germany in political and material terms (see also Major and von Voss 2016, p. 7). There is need of a clear understanding what each side needs and what it will be able to contribute. Also a clear burden-sharing, an efficient division of labour as well as the sensible use of existing structures and institutions would help securing the Baltic Sea region in an effective manner.

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