The Baltic Sea: A region beyond security?

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Zusammenfassung

Sicherheitsfragen nehmen eine neue Position und Bedeutung auf der Agenda der Ostseeregion ein. Um die Stellung der Region innerhalb Europas weiter zu stärken, ist es notwendig und angebracht, über die bisherigen Anfänge hinauszudenken. Das Vorhaben ist nach wie vor durchführbar, da feststeht, dass der Zusammenhalt in der Region wachsen und sie somit stabiler werden wird. Die Zukunft der Beziehungen zwischen der EU und Rußland stellt jedoch den Haken an der Sache dar, und es scheint so, als gliche es einem beispiellosen Kunststück, dieses Problem zu lösen. Um die Möglichkeiten, die sich aus der Situation nach dem Konflikt ergeben haben, wirklich zu nutzen, ist es notwendig, einige der bisher gehegten Prinzipien, hinter sich zu lassen, die die Schaffung des politischen Raumes um die Ostsee herum gelenkt haben.

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Introduction

For some years now, Northern Europe - specially the Baltic Sea region - has conveyed a dual image. Due to the imbroglio between Russia and the Balts, the Baltic Sea region has stood out as one of the few areas in Europe where serious military conflict is still conceivable. Despite being a trouble spot, which makes it interesting for academic analysis, the Baltic Sea region has become far more cooperative. In line with general developments in Northern Europe, it has become a densely regionalized area with ample border-transcending arrangements, including a number of 'euro-regions'.

These two trends, rapid regionalization and high-pitch securitization, might be seen as contradictory to one other; to some extent, this may even be the case. For the most part, the negative 'othering' (a means of defining and securing one's own positive identity through the stigmatization of an 'other') that underpins security talks does not go hand-in-hand with close cooperation, but it is also obvious that security has contributed to regionalization and the re-conceptualization of borders in the Baltic Sea area. The eminence of security on the political agendas has not only been conducive to oppositional formations, exclusionary politics and clear-cut lines of demarcation; it has also spurred various cooperative endeavors. The move from zero-sum and more militaristic views of security has facilitated various joint, regional military endeavors, such as annual 'rescue at sea' type of operations carried out by the naval forces in the region. In fact, the rather 'soft' security thinking, which has become dominant, has led to the encouragement of various 'bottom-up'-type endeavors, networking and local solutions. Consequently, borders have become blurred and the door has been opened to a pluralistic political landscape, one that includes

security cooperation.

However, the constellation that has brought about rather favorable results appears to change as the essential aspects of security change; security is becoming increasingly de-territorialized and less conducive to regionalization. The Baltic Sea region has not been directly impacted by the events of "9/11" and the 'war against terrorism', but the consequences seem nonetheless crucial. They pertain more generally to the Clausewitzian comprehension of war; anarchy as a basic condition in the relations between states is rapidly declining in credibility and is being replaced by more cooperative, norm-based, hierarchic and cosmopolitan aspirations (as well as disagreements in that context). More particularly, the reason for rethinking security and its impact on the unfolding of political space around the Baltic Rim, including the relationship between security and regionalization, consists of Russia indicating that it is becoming a 'partner' in the context of the new, norm-based cosmopolitan system. With Russia no longer resisting the enlargement of NATO and now being one of the 'ins', there is much less justification for perceiving the Baltic Sea area as a potential trouble spot. What is then – with 'hard' security issues declining in salience – the role of the security argument? Does the weakening and change of security also undermine efforts of regionalization or is the effect, in fact, an opposite one, amounting to an even more blurred and de-bordered political landscape as a consequence of regionalization set free and liberated from its bonds to security? There is obviously an opportunity as well as a necessity for significant new thinking, but the re-conceptualization of relationships in the Baltic Sea region can also take somewhat unexpected and unconventional forms; this is the issue that this contribution aims to exploring.

Good News Dominates

It appears opportune, in order to investigate the current trends and constellations, to commence by reviewing the traditional setting around the Baltic Rim, and in particular the way security has affected the unfolding of political space.

Historically, the situation in the Baltic Sea area has been more divisive than unifying. War, conflicts and changing power political constellations were prevalent in the region; only the Hanseatic Period between the 13th and the 15th century stands out as a period when the unifying forces had an upper hand. The Nordic area constitutes another exception, with its prevailing interstate violence and something of a permanent 'war system'[1] – until the beginning of the 19th century, when war became inconceivable as a means for resolving conflicts. Due to an emerging 'we-feeling' that transcended previous national borders without relocating them as a joint Scandinavian and later Nordic identity, interstate wars became unthinkable. By creating an area of 'low tension', this system contributed to some extent to keeping major power rivalry and power politics out of the region, but failed to spread outside the Nordics themselves[2]. The Nordic policies also contributed to the salience of the Baltic Sea area during the period of the Cold War as a semi-periphery in a Europe colored by the conflict between East and West.

As the Cold War petered out toward the end of the 1980s, the canonical

threats disappeared and were replaced by more region-specific constellations. The more specific changes consisted of German unification, followed by the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the demise of the Soviet Union and the re-establishment of independence in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The changes have generally remained peaceful, with the exception of some violent clashes in Lithuania and Latvia in 1991, which were caused mainly by the then Soviet Ministry of Interior troops. Tensions, such as those between Poland and Lithuania, have given way to a normalization of relations; even the Kaliningrad 'conundrum' has become a bone of contention between the EU and Russia in terms of transactions and openness, rather than as an old-fashioned territorial and power political conflict pertaining to military issues.[3]

More generally, the superpower overlay that also aspired to arrange all relations in the Baltic Sea area in correspondence with the overarching bipolarity has broken down: its demise led to the emergence of decidedly more differentiated and cooperative relations. It has been implied that there has been far more good news than bad ones. Actually, the change has been rather dramatic and thorough, given that the Baltic Sea area had little previous experience of region-building, networking, cross-border cooperation and such like. In fact, the region promptly became a laboratory of innovative ways to deal with the divisive nature of borders. Novel politics developed at various levels: below the states, on the level of multilateral agreement among states and on the level of states. In a relative short time, the region has, subsequently, become one of the most regionalized parts of Europe.[4] The instruments that were developed range from very small and local ones to rather large and mainly statist arrangements such as the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS), established in 1992. The guiding principle has become much more one of inclusion rather than exclusion; new formations have emerged that have little to do with security, although security has indeed managed to hold at least some of its ground.

From 'Hard' to 'Soft' Security

Whilst the outcome has been relatively peaceable, the perception prevailed for quite some time that there is potential for serious conflicts in the region. They pertained to various relics, such as the Russian troops, bases and installations that either remained in the Baltic countries or were relocated in the Baltic Sea area as part of Russia's withdrawal from Central Europe. With the redrawing of borders, a number of territorial disputes emerged, although almost all of them – with a couple of minor exceptions – were settled by negotiations.[5]

Russia's relations with the three Baltic countries, above all Estonia and Latvia, have stood out as a major source of friction. The talk of 'near abroads' has been seen as indicating that Russia has problems in accepting the independence of the Balts; Russia remained concerned about the treatment of the Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia. The Balts felt insecure, aspired for western security guarantees in the form of a membership in NATO – and sometimes added to the negative atmosphere by their less than friendly statements.

In retrospect, however, the conflicts have been defused and the

rapprochement appears to be of an enduring kind. Russia has increasingly recognized that the Baltic countries do exist and that they will prevail as independent entities. Moreover, it has even tacitly accepted NATO's enlargement to the Baltic countries, a move endorsed at the NATO summit in Prague in autumn 2002. Such a tolerance changes the discourse profoundly. With the enlargement issue basically off the agenda, there will be much less friction in Russian-Baltic relations and in relations between Russia and the Western powers. In fact, the security argument gets seriously deflated; it is less functional for Russia, and Baltic efforts of securitizing Russia are profoundly undermined. This provides a further boost for the rethinking that has already been underway in the Baltic countries. Consequently, the negative 'othering' of Russia has become decidedly less common. Arguments are changing considerably, as indicated for example by Estonia's "Vienna Document" on the exchange of information on defense planning; "Estonia does not see any military threat to its security, either now or in the foreseeable future".[6]

The noticeable improvements pertain to a broad variety of factors. Above all, there has been both an opportunity and necessity to think differently about security. The opportunity emerged with the demise of the Cold War, and a number of actors have contributed to the fact that it has been utilized. The growing importance and enlargement of the EU (with Finnish and Swedish membership in the mid-1990s and an opening up for Polish and Baltic membership) has upgraded economic and societal issues at the expense of 'hard' security.[7] In order to be one of the 'ins', one must have economic potential as well as societal and administrative competence. Even NATO's enlargement appears to have been conducive to a downgrading of negative 'othering' among Russia and the Balts; the prerequisites for good and cooperative relations or – in the case of the Balts – a prospective membership pertain to orderly behavior, lack of conflicts with neighbors as well as the abstention from territorial demands. The enlargement of the alliance has been premised on enhancing European security as a whole and avoiding new dividing lines.[8] The aspired security architecture has not been grounded in a dual logic of NATO facing some other similar formation. There is no sharp division into 'us' and 'them', and in many cases Russia has been invited to join the common endeavors in counteracting instability and unpredictable events.

More generally, there has been a development away from zero-sum and more militaristic views of security towards more inclusive and cooperative understandings. Concepts such as 'comprehensive', 'cooperative' and 'soft' security have procured a rather prominent place on the regional agendas.[9] By the same token, the security of the Baltic Sea area has increasingly been organized around a series of norms that are also widely applicable elsewhere in international politics. The various problems, such as the lack of respect for human rights and minority rights, may thus be seen as having a region-specific appearance, but they are expected to be solved in a cooperative fashion by adhere to a series of neo-Kantian and cosmopolitan norms. Bodies such as the UN, OSCE and the EU have all contributed in the policy field to the entrenchment and maintenance of these norms; the CBSS – in particular through the institution of the Commissioner on Democratic Institutions and Human Rights[10] – has been the dominant

region-specific body in this respect.

Towards a Post-Security Agenda

Security, as an argument, appears to have lost in centrality. It has become less significant as a formative principle. By the same token, new approaches have gained considerable prominence within the discourse, although the more traditional ways of conceiving security have by no means totally disappeared. Notably, the dominant discursive principles have become conducive to overlapping spaces. They have contributed to transforming previously hard edges to rather soft, cooperation-oriented borders and zones of contact, rather than bringing about divisions of an inside-out-type. The prime identities have become multiple rather than remaining singular, and they appear to be formed in an unintended fashion through extensive processes of interaction across previous borderlines and less than before through explicit endeavors of identity-formation within clearly bordered spaces.

The actors of the region have – hitherto – been void of joint and explicit policies vis-à-vis the Baltic Sea region. The previous plurality might continue for some time, although the pressure to develop joint policies in spheres such as energy supply, high-speed rail links, shipping (introduction of 'fast lanes') or environmental protection is increasing rapidly; there are also compelling reasons to arrive at joint views on the development of the region at large – if the aim to gain subjectivity rather than react to policies decided upon elsewhere.

Above all, the fact that the countries of the region are increasingly within the sphere of the EU – Russia is the main exception –, speaks for a process towards more uniform and coordinated policies (for the first time since the Hanseatic harmonization of trading rules and regulations). However, the multilayered nature of the region will certainly prevail. The region will still exceed the external borders of the European Union, but less so than previously with Russia as the only crucial outsider (Norway and Iceland tend to negotiate and handle their EU relationship in other contexts). The future of the Baltic Sea region is thus heavily dependent on the processes and dynamics within the EU, on the ability of the actors of the region to join forces in that context, and on the unfolding of the relationship between the EU and Russia. The recent discussion on which types of ships should be allowed to enter the Baltic Sea during icy conditions bears witness to this. The region's EU members had to make up their minds first, which was then followed by an EU decision on the matter, which in turn had to be negotiated with Russia. The process is currently underway, resulting in all probability into joint norms concerning the requirement placed on capabilities of ships to manage under hard and icy conditions.

With security increasingly in the background, the EU-Russia-relationship assumes a new meaning and may acquire additional depth, particularly in the Baltic Sea area. Russia clearly aspires for a more inclusive posture, but has so far been unable to articulate such an aspiration in terms of well-formulated and thoroughly considered initiatives and policies. The EU has, for its part, focused primarily on implementing a set of policies to govern its increasingly large eastern borders, policies that seem to exclude

as much as they include. The broader aspirations seem to remain unsettled. The deliberation on a 'Wider Europe' (a process underway to deepen the Union's neighborhood policies based on an UK initiative) has to be complemented by more region-specific considerations. There are numerous indications that an interesting contention is destined to arise: to what extent are the policies of the Union to be defined by the established member countries and how much scope do the new members to influence the policies to be pursued? Poland's ideas concerning an 'Eastern Dimension' demonstrate that the newcomers have ideas and are interested in pursuing them in a proper context.

The emerging contention is basically a positive one. It is to be welcomed – among other reasons – because it prompts discussion and debate at a juncture when fresh ideas, re-thinking and dynamism are in great demand. Ideas and visions are obviously required, alongside considerations on functions, institutions, interests and means such as budgets. Moreover, such activities may be necessary in order to safeguard a certain position for Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea region on the Union's agenda. Securing the interest of the region is warranted, because the EU currently tends to prioritize and attend to other issues – such as the need to install joint foreign and security policies as well as the broad variety of issues pertaining to the convent and the future essence of the EU.

The Core Conundrum

In some cases, the 'new' might emerge from the application of ideas and policies that are already available. The accessible EU instruments allow for solutions such as the establishment of a free trade area around the Baltic Rim or the binding of region by a set of associate memberships. Ideas along these lines have recently been voiced. However, the really sensitive question is, "Could some of the sub-regions of those membership candidates – such as Kaliningrad – assume a qualitatively different relationship to the EU than the countries of which they are part?" Does the borderline between the integrated and the non-integrated have to follow clearly demarcated lines or can one envisage some in-between-solutions on a sub-regional basis – a kind of regionally designed EU relationship? Is the Baltic Sea region to be thought of as consisting of a strictly uniform set of rules applicable for everybody without exception, or is there room for plurality and experimentation with a different set of principles being introduced in the case of some sub-regional actors?

The modern period, in which security is conducive to clear-cut lines between the 'ins' and the 'outs', rendered such questions largely nonsensical. However, the new overall logic of the EU-Russia-relationship now decidedly invites such questions. They have gained added legitimacy and can no longer be dismissed as easily as before. Ideas pertaining to plurality and a certain fuzziness – as offering solutions in the case of the EU-Russia-relationship – are not slighted with the same determination as before, although they are still far from having occupied a position on any official agenda. Not even the actors of the region have yet firmly addressed the question of blurring the lines of inclusion and exclusion. Admittedly, the issues are undeniably rather difficult to tackle, given the difficult legacy of

the past.

However, it seems clear that the issues will not fade away. Sooner or later, they may enter – under the name of proposed 'test cases', 'laboratories', 'experiments' and such like – the EU-Russia agenda in an era of post-conflict. A kind of paradigmatic stunt seems to be required to devise a coherent and competent Baltic Sea region policy, a policy premised on inclusion – even in the case of Russia. Once Russia really decides and becomes qualified to 'go Europe', i.e. settling of the dilemma of Russia having in some sense to be included without providing EU-membership for the country as a whole, it will become necessary to consider the formulas and solutions to use. What would an increasingly inclusive Russia-EU-relationship then look like, and does the Baltic Sea area offer any formulas for such a closer relationship to unfold? Moreover, and thinking further along these lines, what is the role of the smaller actors of the region, and what kind of overall regional pattern is bound to develop with the adoption of such a mediating role?

The issues pertaining to the future EU-Russia-relationship undoubtedly do exist; it is equally clear that many of the answers – even to central issues – do not. However, it is also obvious that the invitation to solve the 'conundrum' is crucial to the future of the Baltic Sea area, to the region's prospects for succeeding in relation to Europe's core, and to the region's ability to cope with the increasing competition between the various European regions in a situation of post-conflict.

1 See Wiberg, Håkan (1993): "Scandinavia". In: Richard Dean Burns (ed.): *Encyclopaedia of Arms Control and Disarmament – Volume I.* New York 1993, 209–226., Archer, Clive and Pertti Joenniemi (eds.): *The Nordic Peace.* Aldershot, 2003.

2 Archer, Clive: "The Nordic Area as a 'Zone of Peace'". In: *Journal of Peace Research.* 33 (1996) 2. 451–467.

3 Baxendale, James, Stephen Dewar and David Gowan (eds.): *The EU & Kaliningrad. Kaliningrad and the Impact of EU Enlargement.* London 2000.

4 Hedegaard, Lars and Bjarne Lindström (eds.): *The NEBI Yearbook 1998. North European and Baltic Sea Integration.* Berlin 2002, 537–559.

5 Forsberg, Tuomas: "Settled and Remaining Border Issues around the Baltic Sea". In: Ibid, 437–448.

6 The Republic of Estonia: *Vienna Document 1999. Annual Exchange of Information on Defence Planning.* Mimeo 2002:1.

7 Gänzle, Stefan: "The EU's Presence and Actorness in the Baltic Sea Area: Multilevel Governance Beyond its External Borders". In: Helmut Hubel (ed.): *EU Enlargement and Beyond: The Baltic States and Russia.* Berlin 2002. 73–106., Hyde-Price, Adrian: "The European Union as an Actor in the Baltic Sea Region – A Theoretical Evaluation". In:

Ibid., 41–72.

8 Asmus, Ronald D. and Robert C. Nurrick: "NATO Enlargement and the Baltic States". In: *Survival.* 38 (1996) 2., 121–143.

9 Möttölä, Kari: "Security around the Baltic Rim: Concepts, Actors and Processes". In: Hedegaard/Lindström 2002, footnote 4, 363–404.

10 Birckenbach, Hanne-Margret: "The Tackling of Minority Issues in the Baltic Sea region in the Context of the OSCE and the CBSS". In: Hedegaard/Lindström 2002, footnote 4, 537–559.