

How Norway could use its presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States to help normalise relations with Russia

*In light of the EU's lack of unity over how to approach Russia, the Council for the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), which includes Russia as a member, provides an important supplementary diplomatic forum for regional diplomacy in Europe. **Stefan Gänzle** argues the new Norwegian presidency of the CBSS offers a potential platform for establishing a dialogue between Russia and other European countries.*

On 1 July this year, Lithuania passed the presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States to Norway. In the words of Ine Eriksen Søreide, at the occasion of the ministerial meeting on 1 June, the Norwegian one-year presidency intends to focus on green transformations – the so-called European Green Deal – with the goal of turning the Baltic Sea Region into an innovation hub for sustainability. It will also aim to find new ways to engage young people as well as maintain safety in the region by continuing to work on anti-trafficking and children's rights and strengthening the fight against organised crime and cybercrime.

Soft security

Since February 1992, the CBSS has regularly brought together the nine countries bordering the Baltic Sea as well as countries – such as Norway and Iceland (the latter since 1996) – that are part of the wider region. For Norway, membership in the CBSS has provided an opportunity to contribute to the peaceful development of a region at its doorstep.

The CBSS was founded – on a joint initiative by Denmark and Germany – in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of communism and quickly became a model for similar diplomatic endeavours in the region, such as the Barents-Euro-Arctic Council and the Arctic Council – in which Norway is strongly engaged. Originally established as a platform for intergovernmental cooperation, the CBSS pursued three core objectives at the time.

First, it attempted to provide channels of communication for several Baltic Sea region countries that had become either newly independent or were keen on restoring their diplomatic ties. Second, it focused on contributing to the solution of concrete post-Soviet challenges. Most prominently, the case of the Russia-speaking minorities that had migrated to Estonia and Latvia after these countries had been incorporated into the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Even though questions related to this issue continue to make headlines, the Council – like the EU – has addressed these problems in a collaborative way. Third, the Council was a diplomatic training exercise for the Baltic states, well before EU and NATO membership were imaginable.

These days have gone. EU and NATO enlargement have significantly altered the geopolitical landscape of the Baltic Sea region over the past twenty years. So has Russia's annexation of Crimea and her subsequent involvement in the war in Eastern Ukraine.

In terms of tasks, the CBSS has increasingly focused on projects of functional as well as need-based cooperation, leaving hard politics outside its orbit. In its most recent [Vilnius II declaration](#), it emphasises the importance of cooperation across borders to combat the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, promote further digitalisation, and improve the education and training of young people. Whereas the CBSS started with a rather broad portfolio of tasks, its mandate has been subsequently refined to focus on measures to support the development of a regional identity, improve safety and security, and establish a sustainable and prosperous region.

The return of 'hard' security since 2014

Sweden and Finland are not members of NATO. However, they have both started to consider pursuing closer relations since Russia's intervention in Ukraine. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – in addition to being NATO members – are also bound to reorient themselves towards an exclusively Nordic framework of collaboration, such as the Nordic-Baltic Eight group.

EU-spurred initiatives aimed at keeping the Russian Federation involved in processes of international collaboration in the region have not triggered the aspired results, and, overall, the bilateral relationship is characterised by mutual distrust. Initiatives such as [Nord Stream 2](#) have also failed to be framed as topics of mutual interest for countries in the region – and have instead been left at a strictly bilateral level, between Germany and Russia in this case.

Against this backdrop, the Council of the Baltic Sea States has been strengthened in terms of its capacity to handle small-scale projects that broadly fall in the realm of its core objectives. Over the past few years, the CBSS has acquired some confidence in managing various projects either supported at the regional level of its members or by the European Union. Russia has always emphasised how important it is to maintain the autonomy of the CBSS, something that the Norwegian presidency may be in a position to live up to.

As a matter of fact, the CBSS is for the time being one of the very few organisations where Russia and other European countries effectively speak to one another. While meetings between heads of state and government have been frozen since 2014, the CBSS has still been flexible enough to convene political meetings between ministries, which have taken place nearly every year, though no formal ministerial councils have been organised. The Icelandic presidency of 2017 – in the year celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Council – offered initiatives to help normalise relations with Russia. The Norwegian presidency – as a close partner of the EU but a non-EU member – is very well placed to support similar steps, provided that Russia is willing to return them.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [CBSS Secretariat \(CC BY 2.0\)](#)
