

## **Regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region**

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### **Abstract:**

The article studies and analyzes a successful example of Baltic regionalism and its network structure of cooperation, which is the main format of interstate collaboration in the region. It explores main mechanisms of the regional cooperation, its advantages and disadvantages.

*Key words:* regionalism, horizontal cooperation, Baltic Sea Region (BSR)

### **Main body:**

Modern world development is associated with an objective increase in the role of regional factors in the political and economic life of countries and peoples. This trend is gaining momentum both on a global scale, in the formation of a new regional map of the world, and on a national scale.

The geopolitical changes of the 1980s - the 1990s, as well as the parallel developing globalization and regionalization processes, led to the fact that international regions, including territories and parts of the territories of several states, began to play an increasing role in the world. One of them is the Baltic region, which is gradually overcoming the split of the period of the Cold war and becoming one of the actors of world politics. (1)

Over the past two decades, a large number of various forms of cooperation between countries have been created and applied in the Baltic region. Most of these projects are successfully operating now, without succumbing to the changes and agitations of the political situation.

The Baltic Sea region is for the immediate border between the countries of Europe and Russia, and therefore is of great importance for them. The Baltic Sea Region is a rather vivid example illustrating the transition from traditional regionalism as protectionism, which also existed here at a certain historical stage, to a new regionalism notes M. Lehti. The region and regionalism can be defined in any

period, but they existed in different contexts and their logic was different in the Baltic Sea region. (2)

The processes taking place in the BSR fully meet the characteristics of the new regionalism: there is active cooperation between the administrative regions of the BSR states and the blurring of the borders of these states. This is facilitated by several factors: a common geographical landmark is the sea, the membership of most of countries of the region in the EU, which by itself eliminates borders and develops interstate cooperation. The BSR was formed as a result of common interests and networking between states and subregions of several countries.

The regional construction on the Baltic is a sphere of interest not only of state actors. Today, the BSR remains a flexible, blurry process, open to various stakeholders. The regional cooperation has become a platform for activity not only for interstate, ministerial cooperation, but also for the subregional spectrum, and representatives of other spheres and levels: interest groups, municipalities with similar problems, and even cities have created numerous new networks. Baltic cooperation is characterized by a combination of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations working in this territory, and a whole set of associations.

Nowadays, the BSR continues to play positive roles in the development of modern political processes due to its geographical, political, and economic parameters. The international region of the Baltic Sea countries has a significant impact on the formation of a modern system of international relations, being one of the most dynamically developing international regions in Europe. Regionalization marked a shift from hard to soft security.

As mentioned earlier, the Baltic Sea region is very rich in various forms and structures of cooperation. The most important ones, according to S. Gänzle, are: the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Northern Dimension, the EU Strategy for the BSR, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Baltic Cooperation and the Baltic-Northern Cooperation (NB 8), NB 6, the Arctic Council, the Barents – Euro-Arctic Council, various mechanisms of transboundary cooperation, etc. (3)

This particular article examines the functionality of the Council of the Baltic Sea States and projects implementing under the transboundary cooperation programs.

The Council of States, being an intergovernmental forum, carries out most of its initiatives through horizontal interaction between local authorities, enterprises, universities, public and non-governmental organizations, and business circles of the participating countries. Horizontal political actions assume that their actors have relative autonomy, function in an equal political and legal field and have equal status when making decisions. Such a system eliminates the imposition of political initiatives “from above” by state structures, and the influence of big politics and disagreements among the participating countries on non-institutionalized networks of regional cooperation. Such a mechanism allows solving the pressing problems of regional construction and has already proved its effectiveness. It is the successful network cooperation that is the hallmark of the Baltic region in general and the CBSS in particular. In addition, the main characteristic of the CBSS is its umbrella-structure. It involves the coordination of more than 60 working and expert groups, structures and organizations established under its auspices (4). The importance of the CBSS is explained by the fact that its one of the main mechanisms of cooperation and also it helps to hold ecological, cultural and social programs and it is not a base for political issues. (5)

This region is characterized by high level of transboundary and cross-regional interaction. Its cross-border cooperation is expressed in participation of regional authorities in bilateral and multilateral international cooperation at the intergovernmental level, as well as (in exceptional cases) cooperation between Russian regions and state authorities of neighboring countries (for example, within the Council on Long-term Cooperation between the Republic of Lithuania and the Kaliningrad Region of the Russian Federation) as well as in bilateral cooperation agreements with border regions of neighboring countries and bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements at the local level. The EU regional policy, in addition to the strategy for the Baltic Sea region, includes programs for promoting regional cooperation – Interreg programs for the period of 2014–2020 are a

continuation of a similar initiative that operated from 2007 to 2013. Together with seven European countries, they merged into seven programs for cross-border cooperation: Russia-Latvia, Russia-Lithuania, Russia-South-Eastern Finland, Russia-Poland, Russia-Estonia, Karelia (Russia-Finland) and Kolarctic. (6)

Despite the situation that escalated after the introduction of sanctions and the cooling of relations between Russia and the European Union, projects within the framework of cross-border cooperation successfully continue their work; new bilateral and multilateral agreements are concluded between the countries of the Baltic region. “The EU sanctions imposed against Russia in 2014 did not affect cross-border cooperation programs,” said Azer Talibov, Deputy Minister of Economic Development of the Russian Federation. He also added that the total funding for these agreements for 2018-2020 would be about 123 million euros, with the share of the Russian Federation –41.2 million euros for year 2018. (7)

Nowadays, in the conditions of a difficult political situation and a cooling of political relations between Russia and Europe, the formats of network cooperation of the Baltic region continue their work. This is due to well-established mechanisms of interaction, as well as the "horizontal" structuring of the region and extensive network links that are little affected by political influence.

The Baltic Sea region is considered to be one of the most stable and prosperous regions in Europe. The Baltic countries, the Nordic countries, Russia – countries that are very different from each other in terms of economic indicators, political culture, worldview - were able to create an effective system of joint activities in the Baltic Sea region that meets the realities of our time.

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