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Damian Szacawa

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Evolution of the Council of the Baltic Sea States: three decades of regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region (1991-2021)



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Summary

- The Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) was established in March 1992, while negotiation on its creation had started shortly after the end of the Cold War. This new international situation forced major changes in the foreign policies of states in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR).
- The CBSS brought the participating member states from both sides of the former Iron Curtain together to ensure a regional forum for political dialogues on the creation of stable conditions for the development of peaceful relations in the BSR, building partnerships and mutual trust.
- In the 1990s, cooperation in the CBSS was conceptualised primarily in terms of promoting the transition and transformation of Poland, Baltic States, and even Russia in line with ‘European values’: liberal democracy, rule of law, and ability to transnationally cooperate on common “soft” challenges to international security (economic, social, and environmental). By gradually

widening its scope of action, CBSS cooperation now covers almost every field of governmental activity, with the exception of high politics.

- Due to the dynamics of the evolving international environment in the CBSS, the CBSS member states have decided on several occasions that both the structures and the scope of the CBSS needed to be reformed. This has shown the CBSS' ability to adapt and improve its endurance in the region as well as to bring added values in the areas identified as most relevant for strengthening the competitiveness of the region.
- Actually, the CBSS is well prepared to participate in a regional governance model, as it is a highly institutionalised regional intergovernmental organisation, responsible also for developing bottom-up initiatives involving private actors around the Baltic Sea. During almost 30 years of activity, the CBSS has acquired outstanding expertise in areas such as civil security (e.g., children at risk, human trafficking), and sustainable development.
- In the 1990s and early 2000s, the CBSS was perceived by the European Commission (EC) as the main regional actor for the coordination of the European Union's (EU) activities in the BSR. However, after two enlargements in 1995 and 2004, the CBSS's importance for the EC was gradually reduced to simply being a partner of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR). After the EUSBSR was launched in 2009, the CBSS was increasingly operating in the shadow of the EU and its Strategy, but over the years it has regained its importance. The inclusion of Russia (and

the EC) as equal members makes the CBSS an important platform for regional cooperation in the juncture of EU internal and external policies.

- The last CBSS reform in 2020 means that despite unfavoured external conditions after the annexation of Crimea, the CBSS is still an important place for regional political dialogue based on a more flexible and pragmatic formula, taking into account the current state of relations. This will be complemented with the practical dimension based on the CBSS experiences in project development and people-to-people contacts. Therefore, the CBSS Secretariat will gain more significance, not only on project implementation within the EUSBSR but also to facilitate and initiate intergovernmental dialogue in the region.



Introduction and framework for analysis: Soft International Organisations and subregional groups

Questions of the causes of conflict between actors in international relations as well as issues of conditions for cooperation between them are in the spotlight of the International Relations Theory (IRT). There is extensive literature on the explaining of mutual cooperation and the relationships between states – many schools of thought in the IRT are trying to explain the phenomenon of cooperation between sovereign states pursuing their own interests in a decentralized international environment. Interstate cooperation is variously subsumed and defined, but most of the definitions emphasize that international relations resist the voluntary legitimacy within the international institutions and the principle of reciprocity.

Nevertheless, over the past several years, researchers have increasingly been turning attention to the growing role of international organisations in world politics. Among the numerous international institutions, understood as a struc-

ture to ensure repeatability of behaviour, a special place is occupied by intergovernmental organisations (IGOs). They arise as a result of the agreement between at least three sovereign states in order to carry out specific goals. The growth of international institutions is one of the regularities of the development of international relations¹. The IGOs could be distinguished with regard to a number of criteria, but one of the most important is about membership, which allows dividing the whole group into global organisations (like the United Nations), and regional ones. Subregional cooperation, which is very often behind the establishment of regional organisation, has been defined as ‘a process of regularized, significant political and economic interaction among a group of neighbouring states’², in which state and non-state actors are involved on different levels. These interactions include a wide range of cross-border issues, i.e., economic development, EU pre-accession support, environmental protection, infrastructure, fighting organised crime, education, and culture.

The main aim of this study is to shed light on the evolution and adaptability of the Council of the Baltic Sea States from the end of the Cold War to the present day. This organisation was established in 1992 to build trust among member states, increase security in the Baltic Sea Region, and manage joint regional challenges and issues after the end of the Cold War. During almost thirty years of its history, real events in the BSR have influenced the international

¹ M. Pietraś, *Organizacje międzynarodowe*, [in:] *Międzynarodowe stosunki polityczne*, M. Pietraś (ed.), Lublin 2007, pp. 92-98.

² R. Dwan, *Introduction* [in:] *Building Security in Europe's New Borderlands: Subregional Cooperation in the Wider Europe*, R. Dwan (ed.), Abingdon-New York 1999, p. 2.

position of the CBSS. Therefore, the evolution of the CBSS is understood as a dynamic process conditioned by changes at the level of the international system. Thus, these changes are treated as an independent variable, and the CBSS adaptation as a dependent variable. Today, it is one of the subregional organisations, which has significantly strengthened the region's role in the political and economic life of Europe.

In this context, two hypotheses need to be validated. Firstly, the CBSS has evolved since its inception from a loose intergovernmental cooperation in 1992, to a regional intergovernmental organisation with a well-developed institutional structure by the end of 2021. Secondly, external factors, i.e., influences that emerge from the broader international environment, were crucial for launching a reform process, which showed that the CBSS is well prepared to adapt.

Methodologically, the study was conducted based on qualitative methods: content analysis and desk research of primary and secondary sources, institutional and legal analysis, and semi-structured interviews in the CBSS.

The author emphasizes the continuity and change as two sides of the evolution of the CBSS, that influenced state interests and determined the degree to which national governments have been willing to engage in cooperation across the BSR. The analysis is structured as follows: it first reviews the changing security environment and the gradual shift from conflict to cooperation in the BSR following the end of the Cold War. The next section addresses how challenges both old and new have been shaping the CBSS in-between the EU's two enlargements. The third section then reviews the fundamental question of the CBSS's usefulness for coop-

eration around the EU's almost 'internal sea'. Subsequently, practical cooperation over project implementation and its importance for the CBSS is analysed. The final part sketches out the main directions of the last reform and investigates the current situation in the BSR. The dates presented, in relation to the beginning and end of phases of evolution, are conventional and purely theoretical. The criterion for their separation is the gradual increase in the competences of the CBSS and the development of its institutional structures.



1. Genesis and conceptualisation of the CBSS (1991-1996)

The establishment of the Council of the Baltic Sea States was preceded by indirect competition over the idea of Baltic regionalism between states and self-governing institutions. At the end of the 1980s, self-governmental entities led by the then Prime Minister of Schleswig-Holstein, Björn Engholm, came up with proposals for regional bottom-up cooperation, defined as a “New Hanseatic League”, “Baltic Forum”, or “Baltic Council”. On the other hand, the concept of intergovernmental cooperation was formulated by Sweden and Poland and later developed by Germany and Denmark. Both parties seeking support for their concept held political consultations at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, scientific conferences and expert seminars were also an important part of the CBSS conceptualization. Finally, the initiative of Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Uffe Ellemann-Jensen (so-called “founding fathers”), the foreign ministers of Germany and Denmark, respective-

ly, had prevailed and on March 5-6, 1992, an international conference was organised in Copenhagen³.

Both ministers paid particular attention to the “need of the moment”, which was the result of enormous geopolitical changes that took place in the Baltic Sea region after the end of the Cold War. They had three main goals at the time of preparing the assumptions for the future framework of cooperation; to create a bridge between Russia and Western states, to fill potentially dangerous space in the region, and to facilitate dialogue between states in the BSR. During the two-day conference, the foreign ministers discussed the construction of the future international institution, and on the second day, they signed the documents that formed the basis of the CBSS. Therefore, the CBSS became the first sub-regional cooperative institution, connecting states from both sides of the former East-West dividing line as well as non-aligned Finland and Sweden⁴.

During the Copenhagen conference, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, as shown in Figure 1, agreed on two basic documents for the CBSS that defined the goals, structure, and principles of operation of the new international institution. The 1992 Copenhagen Declaration, which formed the founding document of the CBSS, is not an international treaty; rather, it consists of an introduction and three parts, devoted to the Council, cooperation between regions in the

³ L.-K. Williams, *Post-modern and intergovernmental paradigms of Baltic Sea co-operation between 1988 and 1992: The genesis of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) as a historical case study*, “NORDEUROPAforum: Zeitschrift für Politik, Wirtschaft und Kultur” 2005, vol. 1, pp. 3-20.

⁴ M. Dangerfield, *From sub-regionalism to macro-regionalism in Europe and the European Union*, [in:] *A “macro-regional” Europe in the making: theoretical approaches and empirical evidence*, S. Gänzle, K. Kern (eds), Basingstoke-New York 2016, pp. 27-32.

Figure 1. Participants of the first CBSS Council meeting, (Copenhagen, March 5-6, 1992)



Front row (left to right): Paavo Väyrynen, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, Lennart Meri.
Back row (left to right): Stefan Pelny, Andrey Kozyrev, Thorvald Stoltenberg, Algirdas Saudargas, Krzysztof Skubiszewski, Margaretha af Ugglas, Janis Jurkans.

Source: CBSS, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/cbss1992.gif> [10.10.2021].

BSR, and further activities, but it did not create any legal obligations for its members⁵. However, the CBSS Terms of Reference (hereinafter referred to as “ToR”) contain detailed arrangements regarding the operating principles of the CBSS activity, composition, and division of competences between various CBSS structures as well as others that were of a rather technical nature⁶.

⁵ CBSS (1992), *CBSS 1st Ministerial Session – Copenhagen Declaration*, Copenhagen, 5 March 1992, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/1992-CBSS-1st-Ministerial-Session-Communique.pdf> [10.10.2021].

⁶ D. Szacawa, *Podstawy prawne Rady Państw Morza Bałtyckiego (RPMB)*, “Rocznik Europejskiego Kolegium Polskich i Ukraińskich Uniwersytetów” 2009, no. 5, pp. 357-370.

Reactions to the creation of the CBSS in the world and regional press were mostly positive. Initially, the CBSS was a traditional intergovernmental cooperation, the architecture of which was based on the work of the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO), a body composed of representatives from the foreign ministries of the CBSS member states, and the entire organisation was operated in accordance with the principles typical of the organisation of “old regionalism”. Moreover, the main areas of the CBSS activity were characteristic of classic foreign policy rather than non-governmental cooperation. In fact, they were due to the provisions of the “Copenhagen Declaration”, in which six areas of cooperation were agreed, shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The CBSS areas of cooperation 1992-2009

Assistance to new democratic institutions	Economic & technological assistance and cooperation	Humanitarian matters and health
Protection of the environment and Energy cooperation	Cooperation in the field of culture, education, tourism and information	Transport and communication

Source: Own study based on CBSS (1992), *CBSS 1st...*, op. cit.

The first few years of the CBSS were spent on developing and specifying the ideas set out in the 1992 Copenhagen Declaration. Further tasks were set by the ministers of foreign affairs during subsequent CBSS Ministerial Sessions in Helsinki (March 16-17, 1993), Tallinn (May 24-25, 1994), and Gdańsk (May 18-19, 1995), and were carried out by the CSO, utilising the newly formed structures. During the first

two years, three working groups were set up – the Expert Group on Nuclear and Radiation Safety (EGNRS), and the Working Group on Democratic Institutions (WGDI) – both established in 1992, and the Working Group on Economic Cooperation (WGEC) in 1993. The regional cooperation was also developed around the promotion of social and cultural interaction in the BSR, which were much less politicized and not tied to any of the great powers of the region⁷.

In 1994, the so-called EuroFaculty, supporting the reform process of higher education in the fields of law, economy, public administration, and political science was opened at three universities in the Baltic states (Tartu, Riga, and Vilnius)⁸. Finally, after lengthy negotiations between Russia and the Baltic states, in the same year, the Commissioner of the CBSS on Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, including the Rights of Persons Belonging to Minorities (CBSS Commissioner) was formed⁹.

While the creation of three working groups and the EuroFaculty did not raise major controversies and was an expression of a pragmatic orientation towards the development of cooperation in the BSR and solving potential regional problems, the creation of the CBSS Commissioner sparked heated debates. The Baltic states feared that Russia would try to dominate the work of the CBSS and use this forum to

⁷ K. Musiał, Z. Śime, *How to build legitimacy of regional integration on rational foundations – a case of epistemic communities in the Baltic Sea area*, "Journal of Baltic Studies" 2021, vol. 52, no. 4, pp. 483-501.

⁸ A. Krohn, *The Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS): Fostering Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region*, "German Yearbook of International Law" 2000, vol. 43, pp. 65-76.

⁹ O. Espersen, *Human rights protection in the Baltic Sea area: The Commissioner of the Council of the Baltic Sea States on Democratic Institutions and Human Rights including the Rights of Persons belonging to Minorities*, "Helsinki Monitor" 1996, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 52-64.

exert international pressure on them. In an effort to protect the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia and Latvia, Russia was able to block the withdrawal of its troops from the territory of these states. However, Russia opted for a decisive political offensive, which ended in success – in January 1994, it threatened to withdraw from the work of the CBSS if the latter did not take up the issue of minorities in its work. Russia's offensive, however, was curtailed by a joint initiative of Estonia and Sweden, who threatened to block the upcoming Council meeting in Tallinn, if Russia did not soften its position. At the end of this period, important changes had occurred in the BSR, including the 1995 enlargement of the EU to include Finland and Sweden, and the withdrawal of Russian military forces from Latvia and Estonia in 1994, but among the institutional decisions related to the CBSS, the most important issue was the acceptance of Iceland as a full member of the Council in 1996¹⁰.

At that time, the CBSS was a regional cooperation initiative in which the EU participated in practical terms only as an observer. A change in approach gradually occurred as a result of the accession of Finland and Sweden to the EU, which created a new geopolitical reality for the EU in Northern Europe. From the EU's point of view, the particular significance of this enlargement was that Finland's membership provided the EU with a 1300 km long physical border with Russia¹¹. Therefore, not surprisingly, the primary objective of Finland's Northern Dimension (ND) proposal in 1997 was

¹⁰ D. Hartelius, *Sub-regional Security Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Space: Time to Move Ahead*, "EWI Policy Brief" 1998, no. 1, pp. 3-4.

¹¹ H. Haukkala, *Multi-Causal Social Mechanisms and the Study of International Institutionalisation: The Case of EU-Russia Strategic Partnership*, Turku 2008, pp. 218-219.

to provide the Union with a regional policy framework, especially in terms of relations with Russia in the region. The first years of the ND policy, however, did not change much in the Union's approach towards the CBSS – Christopher S. Browning argues that the EU was at best cautious towards such regional initiatives, very often distanced, and even somewhat “suspicious”. It was not until the 2004 EU enlargement to include the Baltic States and Poland that a change was triggered in EU policy, with the North becoming more involved and increasingly seen as a testbed for regional security governance¹².

¹² Ch. S. Browning, *Experimenting in the northern laboratory: the emergence of an EU approach to security governance in the north and its broader significance*, “European Security” 2010, vol. 19, no. 3, p. 396.



2. In-between the two EU enlargements: New priorities and new challenges for the CBSS (1996-2004)

The 1995 EU enlargement and the start of accession negotiations with Poland and the Baltic states were key to the growing importance of the BSR in Europe. Simultaneously, these events were accompanied by new foreign ministers, and for the CBSS, the resignation of its “fathers” – Genscher (1992) and Ellemann-Jensen (1993), was especially severe. Their successors – Klaus Kinkel and Niels Helveg Petersen were much less active advocates for the BSR, which was visible during the Danish CBSS presidency and the rather restrained position of Chancellor Helmut Kohl towards regional integration in the BSR because he wished to avoid annoying Russia¹³. Therefore, the initiative to further develop regional

¹³ The only element introduced by the administration of Helveg Petersen was to shift the emphasis to the importance of non-state actors in solving non-military security issues in the regional security complex, see more: F. Tassinari, *Mare Europaeum: Baltic Sea Re-*

cooperation had to be taken over by other actors. Sweden became the state that “took over” the baton from Germany and Denmark. During its presidency, including the adoption of three Action Programmes (‘Participation and Stable Political Development’, ‘Economic Integration and Prosperity’, and ‘Sustainable Development and Environmental Protection’), the CBSS Permanent International Secretariat in Stockholm was opened. Moreover, for the first time since 1990, a Summit of the Heads of Government of the Baltic Sea states and the President of the European Commission took place, on May 3-4, 1996, in Visby, Gotland. The main aim of the first Baltic Sea States Summit was to provide the CBSS with more clout and new impulses for further cooperation¹⁴.

The activity of the EU also increased, especially after the “Baltic Sea Region Initiative” was adopted by the European Commission in April 1996 and accepted during the European Council meeting in Florence. This initiative defines the CBSS programs and projects being of interest to the EU, which could count on EU financial aid to strengthen political stability and economic development in the BSR¹⁵. A further extension of this initiative was the adoption of the ND by the European Council in 1999, constituting the official Northern neighbourhood framework¹⁶.

gion Security and Cooperation from post-Wall to post-Enlargement Europe, Copenhagen 2004, pp. 145-148.

¹⁴ C.-E. Stalvant, *The Council of Baltic Sea States* [in:] *Subregional Cooperation in the New Europe: Building Security, Prosperity and Solidarity from the Barents to the Black Sea*, A. Cottey (ed.), London 1999, pp. 59-60.

¹⁵ European Commission, *Commission Launches “Baltic Sea Region Initiative”*, IP/96/302, 10.04.1996, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_96_302 [10.10.2021].

¹⁶ R. M. Czarny, *The High North: Between Geography and Politics*, Heidelberg-New York 2016, pp. 177-187.

New bodies of the CBSS were established shortly after the three Action Programmes for the Baltic Sea States Co-operation were adopted during the annual CBSS ministerial session in Kalmar on 2-3 July 1996¹⁷. Firstly, the CBSS permanent international Secretariat was launched in Stockholm (Strömsborg), with the official beginning of the Secretariat's activities taking place on October 20, 1998. Over the years, the number of staff increased (initially it employed only 9 people, with Mr Jacek Starościak as the first Director-General) as further special units were created in the CBSS Secretariat, for example, "Baltic 21", "Children at Risk", and BASREC. Its launch was timed to coincide with a change in the EU position towards the CBSS. The very fact of receiving a permanent body, which provides the CBSS with institutional memory is also not without significance. Therefore, despite initial scepticism, the CBSS soon became the centre of the EU's involvement in the BSR, which participated in the process of creating the ND, and later one of the partners in ND policies¹⁸. Even today, its main objectives are related to building trust and security in the region in the post-Cold War era as well as supporting and implementing common international projects that are dealing with joint regional challenges and issues.

Secondly, in February 1999, the Foreign Ministers adopted the "Principles and Guidelines for Third Party Participation

¹⁷ The 1996 Kalmar Action Programmes were focussed on the main areas of co-operation, namely: increased direct contacts between people and civic security, economic co-operation and integration, and strengthened environmental protection, V. Birkavs, *Co-Operation in the Baltic Sea Region: Experience and Aspirations*, "Studia Diplomatica" 1997, vol. 50, no. 1, p. 63.

¹⁸ T. Christiansen, *Between "In" and "Out": EU Integration and Regional Policy-making in North-eastern Europe*, [in:] *The NEBI Yearbook 1999: North European and Baltic Sea Integration*, L. Hedegaard, B. Lindström (eds), Berlin Heidelberg 1999, pp. 201-206.

in CBSS Activities and Meetings”¹⁹. This contains detailed provisions for two types of not-full membership, the status of Observer for states and the status of Strategic Partner for organisations. These other forms of membership allowed, on the one hand, to increase the potential of cooperation in the BSR, and engagement of new participants, and on the other – to facilitate and improve the exchange of information between involved parties. During this phase, the CBSS also established first contacts with other similar structures – the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC) in the north and the Central European Initiative (CEI) in the south²⁰.

It should be emphasized that all cooperation within the CBSS, including the newly created bodies, was still solely a forum for cooperation between foreign ministers. However, in the following years, this regional cooperation was extended to first meetings of sectoral ministries from the CBSS member states. The CBSS presence in the region was also promoted by the CBSS newspaper “Baltinfo”, published from March 1997. Gradually, the CBSS cooperation format tended to become a synonym of all intergovernmental activities in the BSR, at the same time posing a serious challenge of coordination between annual Council and less regular meetings between sectoral ministries on a provisional basis²¹.

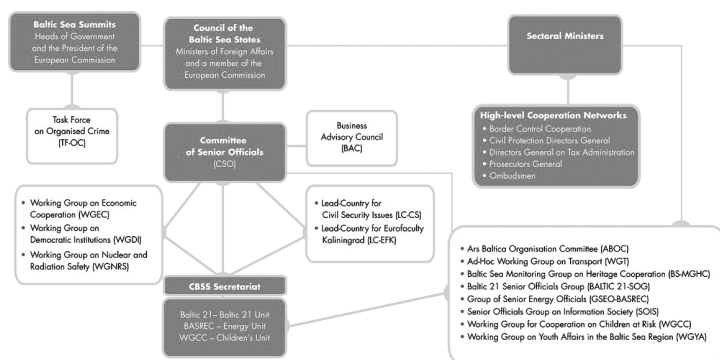
¹⁹ CBSS (1999), *Principles and Guidelines for Third Party Participation in CBSS Activities and Meetings*, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/principles-and-guidelines-for-3rd-party-participation-in-cbss-activities-and-meetings-2009-pdf.pdf> [10.10.2021].

²⁰ D. Szacawa, *Struktury współpracy subregionalnej w Europie Północnej: Rada Państw Morza Bałtyckiego, Euroarktyczna Rada Morza Barentsa i Rada Arktyczna*, [in:] *Arktyka na początku XXI wieku: między współpracą a rywalizacją*, M. Łuszczuk (ed.), Lublin 2013, pp. 268-270.

²¹ J. Starościk, *The Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS). Its mandate and working procedures and its significance for the Baltic Sea Region*, “SCHIFF-Texte” 1999, no. 56, p. 10.

Soon, however, further decisions on the coordination of intergovernmental cooperation were taken – during the 3rd BSS Summit in Kolding (12-13 April 2000), it was decided that intergovernmental cooperation in the BSR would take place within the CBSS under the “umbrella” of this organisation²². The following years of the CBSS operations were spent on developing cooperation and coordinating numerous projects, including those carried out by the CBSS Strategic Partners. The organisational structure of the CBSS at the end of 2004 was much more complex than it was in the middle of the 90s and is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Organisational structure of the Council of the Baltic Sea States in 2004



Source: CBSS webpage.

Cooperation between economic actors, civil society, and professionals has created the possibility to develop the re-

²² Baltic Sea States Summit (2000), *Chairman's Conclusions: Baltic Sea Co-operation and European Stability and Integration*, 3rd Baltic Sea States Summit, Kolding, Denmark, 12-13 April 2000, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2000-3rd-Baltic-Sea-States-Summit-Chairmans-Conclusions.pdf> [10.10.2021].

gional dimension of EU-Russia relations from the bottom up. Thus, the CBSS, in conjunction with many other cooperation initiatives in the BSR, has facilitated the bottom-up creation of a regional security community²³. But as Poland and the Baltic states concluded negotiations with the EU and NATO, questions about what to do with cooperation within the CBSS, and even whether the CBSS would be needed after the 2004 dual enlargement were heard more often²⁴.

²³ M. Ekengren, *A return to geopolitics? The future of the security community in the Baltic Sea Region*, "Global Affairs" 2018, vol. 4, no. 4-5, p. 508.

²⁴ Ch. S. Browning, P. Joenniemi, *Introduction: The Challenges of EU and NATO Enlargement*, "Cooperation & Conflict" 2004, vol. 39, no. 3, p. 227.



3. *Quo Vadis*, the CBSS: whether the mission has been accomplished (2004-2009)?

With the 2004 enlargement of the EU and NATO, after which the Baltic Sea became almost the EU's "internal sea", we can distinguish the next – third phase of cooperation. The fifth BSS Summit held on 21 June 2004 in Laulasmaa (Estonia), was devoted to this new situation that had a positive impact on increasing security and stability in the region. The fundamental and peaceful change in the post-Cold War BSR was a very important structural change that forced the CBSS to adapt to the new international environment. It was mainly due to the fact, that the two biggest challenges for the region, namely military and socio-economic security, had been solved. Politicians and scientists announced the end of one era and the beginning of another – the Baltic Sea as the "inner sea" of the EU, which felt more confident and began to supersede regional cooperation within the CBSS and the BEAC. Typical for the late 90s and early 2000s, the rhetoric of "partnership" was superseded by reducing their

role to simple “executors” of EU policies, and discourse began introducing hierarchical relations between the EU and regional structures accompanied by the prioritization of the EU’s position over the position of regional organisations²⁵. Helmut Hubel also notes that the dual enlargement in fact created new problems in the BSR and increased the influence of external factors on the development of the overall situation in the BSR²⁶.

Poland, which held its second presidency of the CBSS in 2004/2005, argued that the CBSS should be a flexible and effective organisation, aiming to improve its efficiency, together with the rejection of useless structures and excessive bureaucracy. The multitude of organisations, both intergovernmental and non-governmental, called on the CBSS to better-allocate tasks, and to develop a mechanism for a clearer division of labour. Adam D. Rotfeld (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland, 2005-2006) highlighted that dynamic economic development, strong regional ties, and a well-developed network of decentralized institutions were the greatest opportunities for the BSR. On the other side, new asymmetric and global threats as well as the new role of the EU and NATO in the BSR were key variables at that time. These factors, together with progressive segregation of Russia from Western institutions, and its renewed hostilities with ‘Europe’, meant that new and old security challenges existed side-by-side in the BSR. All these challenges supported official contact and a strong political commitment from

²⁵ N. Catellani, *The Multilevel Implementation of the Northern Dimension*, [in:] *The Northern Dimension: Fuel for the EU?*, H. Ojanen (ed.), Kauhava-Bonn 2001, pp. 65-66.

²⁶ H. Hubel, *The Baltic Sea Subregion after Dual Enlargement*, “Cooperation and Conflict” 2004, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 289-290.

the EU. Therefore, maintaining close cooperation between CBSS member states and the EC was needed, especially in the context of the implementation of ND policies and the second ND Action Plan 2004-2006²⁷.

However, for a moment the CBSS was almost forgotten, and its future functions remained unclear. The precarious situation carried with the membership of the EU Commission in the CBSS did not help either, because the CBSS did not fit well with the new EU-led Northern Europe. It raised the risk of creating a parallel system integrated only partly with the EU. On the other hand, opinions appeared that the bottom-up process of building the region should be supplemented by a more specific top-down policy, which should improve the image of international institutions seen as chaotic, weak, and overlapping each other. Instead of undermining its position, the CBSS should be strengthened and equipped with appropriate functions that would allow it to make decisions on key issues for the future of the region. Once these conditions were met, the role of the CBSS in the changed international environment should be stronger, and this would relocate discussion about the BSR from the past to the future²⁸.

The dynamics of the international environment created the danger that the CBSS would be marginalised if new challenges were not addressed to effectively enhance stability, security, and prosperity in the region. The CBSS was faced with the need to find an appropriate place for itself among the diverse structures of Baltic regionalism. The CBSS mem-

²⁷ A. D. Rotfeld, *Wider Baltic Sea Region: New and Old Security Challenges*, [in:] *The Baltic Sea Choir – Still in Concert?*, C.-E. Stålvant, E. Windmar (eds), Vällingby 2005, pp. 29-36.

²⁸ M. Lehti, *Baltic region in becoming: from the Council of the Baltic Sea States to the EU's Strategy for the Baltic Sea*, "Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review" 2009, no. 22, p. 10.

ber states wished to avoid any overlapping of regional structures responsible for the same issues. In this context, the efforts of the CBSS to strengthen cooperation with the northern regions of the Russian Federation (St. Petersburg, Pskov, Kaliningrad Oblast), and the inclusion of Belarus and Ukraine in the work of the CBSS as Observers, can be viewed positively as actions that prevented the emergence of new barriers on the EU's eastern borders. Moreover, they met with a positive reaction from Russia, which used the CBSS as an effective platform for harmonising its Baltic strategy with the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)²⁹.

The EUSBSR was presented by the EC in June 2009 as the first EU macro-regional strategy (MRS) and was adopted by the European Council in October 2009. The EU decided that the BSR would be the area where the first strategy would be implemented, due to its desire to use previous experience of multilateral cooperation in this region, which was outlined as an area where new ideas and approaches could be tested and developed over time as best practice examples³⁰. However, it should be noted that neither the Presidency Conclusions of the Brussels European Council (29/30 October 2009) nor the first EUSBSR Action Plan contained any reference to the CBSS Secretariat.

Even before the EUSBSR was launched in June 2009, the CBSS member states started to prepare for the reform of the organisation. This was evidenced by a minor adaptation of

²⁹ A. Sergounin, *Russia and the European Union in the Baltic region: a treacherous path to partnership*, "Baltic Region" 2013, no. 4, pp. 38-47.

³⁰ P. Joenniemi, *The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region: A Catalyst for What?*, "DIIS Brief" 2009, https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/49041/pjo_eu_strategy_balticsearegion.pdf [18.10.2021].

the CBSS ToR in June 2005. The 2005 version added new points governing the work of the CBSS, including, i.a.:

- the crucial importance of the BSS Summits in setting the direction for the development of cooperation in the region;
- the rules of composition and meetings of the CSO;
- the establishment of a subsidiary body for the CSO in the form of a so-called Troika, consisting of 3 CSO officials representing the present, former, and future Presidencies of the CBSS; and
- the addition of the permanent CBSS Secretariat in Stockholm to the CBSS ToR³¹.

The enlargement of the EU, the economic crisis in the region, and growing non-military threats and challenges triggered discussions about the need for deeper reform. At the 14th Ministerial Session of the CBSS (Malmö, 13 June 2007), member states agreed to reform the CBSS to make it more relevant to current needs and challenges in the BSR. They also highlighted the CBSS achievements in fulfilling its objectives, specified in the 1992 Copenhagen Declaration, and pointed out the importance of the new challenges for the whole BSR in an increasingly competitive global environment³².

The aim of the reform was to revitalise the organisation, together with preparing it to better enforce its tasks and equip it with more tailored structures. The CBSS bodies should focus on raising funds to implement key projects for the CBSS. The entire reform process was to be overseen by

³¹ D. Szacawa, *Podstawy...*, pp. 357-370.

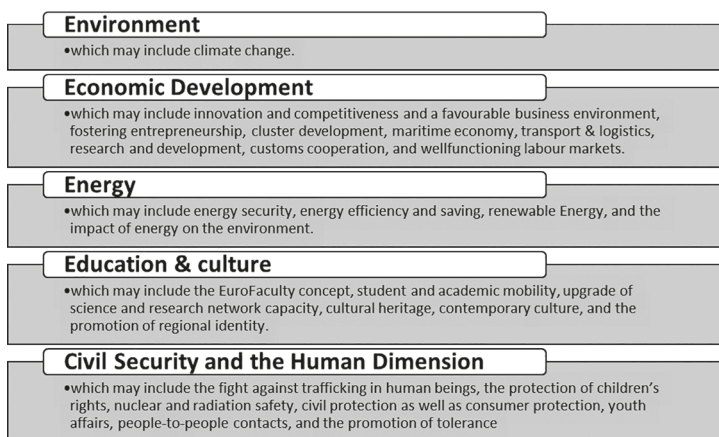
³² CBSS (2007), *Declaration of the Council of the Baltic Sea States in Malmö on 13 June 2007 on a Renewed Baltic Sea States Cooperation*, Malmö, 13 June 2007, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2007-CBSS-14th-Ministerial-Session-Declaration.pdf> [10.10.2021].

the prime ministers of the CBSS member states. However, the burden of carrying out the reform fell on the two states that took over the presidency after Sweden – first Latvia (2007/2008), and then Denmark (2008/2009). In numerous meetings that took place during presidency of Latvia, CBSS reform occupied a key place based on the proposal of Latvian Foreign Minister – Māris Riekstiņš, according to which the future priorities of the CBSS should be environment, energy, economy, and education³³. Later, these efforts were slightly modified during high-level events that were held in June 2009 in Riga: the CBSS Ministers' Deputies Meeting and the 7th BSS Summit. In the "Declaration on the reform of the Council of the Baltic Sea States", five long-term priority areas for cooperation in the BSR were outlined, shown in Figure 4.

Furthermore, the CSO was committed to dissolving existing working groups or transforming them into expert groups by June 2009, and to restructuring the CBSS Secretariat in order to encourage better problem identification, more efficient fund raising, and better project management. The Heads of Government endorsed the above-mentioned declaration and pointed out the need for the CBSS to cooperate more intensively with regional institutions, in particular with the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), and the EU programmes – the ND policy, and the forthcoming EUSBSR³⁴. Finally, at the end of the second presidency of

³³ D. Szacawa, *Zaangażowanie państw bałtyckich w działalność Rady Państw Morza Bałtyckiego (RPMB)*, [in:] *Państwa bałtyckie w zintegrowanej Europie*, J. W. Gołębiowski (ed.), Warszawa 2011, pp. 116-118.

³⁴ CBSS (2008), *7th Baltic Sea Summit: Chairman's Conclusions*, Riga, 4 June 2008, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2008-7th-Baltic-Sea-States-Summit-Chairmans-Conclusions.pdf> [11.10.2021].

Figure 4. The CBSS areas of cooperation 2009-2014

Source: Own study based on CBSS (2008), *Declaration on the reform of the Council of the Baltic Sea States*, Riga, 3 June 2008, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2008-Riga-Declaration-on-the-Reform-of-the-Council-of-the-Baltic-Sea-States.pdf> [11.10.2021].

Denmark, new CBSS ToR were adopted, and the Council's internal structure was revised to better serve the new objectives and priorities. Other decisions of the 2009 CBSS 15th Ministerial Session Declaration in Elsinore included:

- dissolution of the WGDI and WGEC;
- transformation of the WGNRS into the Expert Group on Nuclear and Radiation Safety (EGNRS);
- setting up an Expert Group on Maritime Policy (EGMP);
- adjustment of the Expert Group on Youth Affairs and the Expert Group for Cooperation on Children at Risk in line with the principles of the CBSS reform;

- integration of the “Baltic 21” into the CBSS as the Expert Group on Sustainable Development (EGSD) as of 1 January 2010³⁵.

The 2009 CBSS reform was of key importance for the further development of the organisation and resulted in increased participation of the CBSS in regional projects. This involved the transformation of working groups into expert groups, the adoption of new guidelines for participation in projects, and the creation of a separate budget line for project development within the budget of the CBSS Secretariat.

³⁵ CBSS (2009), *15th CBSS Ministerial Session: Declaration*, Elsinore, 4 June 2009, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2009-CBSS-15th-Ministerial-Session-Declaration-Elsinore.pdf> [11.10.2021].



4. A decade of management of international projects (2009-2019)

Lithuania's Presidency (2009/2010) focused on the continuation of the institutional reform of the CBSS, especially as regards the regional cooperation architecture in the BSR. This was done through meetings of the CSO, which addressed such topics as the future tasks of the CBSS in relation to the EUSBSR, collaboration between the CBSS and its Observers and Strategic Partners, and the preparation of the 2020 Vilnius Declaration – “A Vision for the Baltic Sea Region by 2020”. This document was adopted at the end of the 8th BSS Summit in Vilnius (1-2 June 2010) and contained a number of commitments by the states of the region. According to this declaration, the BSR should become one of the most prosperous, innovative, and competitive regions in the world by 2020. Moreover, the states agreed that in the long term, regional integration should deepen, the quality of the environment should improve, and the identity of the region should strengthen. In respect of social securi-

ty, continuous progress in combating terrorism, fighting organized crime (especially trafficking in human beings, including children), and enhancing the protection and resilience of critical infrastructure should be visible for the people of the BSR³⁶.

The new structures of the CBSS started implementing their projects, especially by structures functioning in the area of “environment” and “civil security and the human dimension”. It should be noted that in this phase, mutual cooperation through projects was central to the CBSS activities, especially after several high-level meetings were cancelled due to the Russian Federation’s behaviour outside the BSR (Crimea, eastern Ukraine). The institutional setup, particularly the division of responsibilities of that time, varied greatly as projects were implemented in all the CBSS areas of cooperation, but a network-based and transnational manner were their common feature.

The Task Force against Trafficking in Human Beings (TFTHB), Sustainable Development/Baltic 21 (from July 2016 as the Expert Group on Sustainable Development – Baltic 2030), and Children at Risk (CAR) are excellent examples of the CBSS Secretariat’s units with strong project portfolios. They produced training and literature for consular staff, civil officers, and NGOs in the region on how to handle trafficking victims, adapt to climate change, or protect children. Moreover, they were not only supported by networks inside the BSR, very often their work was ap-

³⁶ CBSS (2010), *8th Baltic Sea States Summit: Vilnius Declaration – A Vision for the Baltic Sea Region by 2020*, Vilnius, 1-2 June 2010, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2010-CBSS-8th-Baltic-Sea-States-Summit-in-Vilnius-A-Vision-for-the-Baltic-Sea-Region-by-2020.doc> [11.11.2021].

preciated outside the region on a regional or truly global level (e.g., cooperation between the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the TFTHB)³⁷. In this phase, more than 20 regional cooperation networks of varying kinds were associated with the CBSS – some of them were as old as the CBSS (such as EGRNS), others were established at the end of the 1990s, like the Monitoring Group on Cultural Heritage. After the 9th BSS Summit in Stralsund in May 2012, a one million euro large Project Support Facility (PSF) was launched. Its main purpose was to support the Baltic Sea macro-regional cooperation project development endorsed by such networks, and quite often they covered more than one priority area³⁸.

After the CBSS reform, presidencies had to coordinate their work programs with the CBSS long-term priorities, but that didn't mean their national interests were not relevant for the policy priorities of the rotating 1-year chairmanships. For example, Norway (1 July 2010 – 30 June 2011) highlighted its trade interests and prioritized maritime policy and shipping, while Russia (1 July 2012 – 30 June 2013) was interested in simplifying visa regimes³⁹. Even more so, the Russian CBSS Presidency demonstrated that this state did not want to interact with the EUSBSR, and traditionally preferred bilateral contacts or multilateral forums (like CBSS), at which Russia was treated as an equal partner and retained its say

³⁷ J. Lundin, *The Council of the Baltic Sea States in the era of regional strategies, networks, and projects*, "Baltic Rim Economies" 2013, no. 1, p. 15, https://sites.utu.fi/bre/wp-content/uploads/sites/227/2019/04/BRE_2013_1.pdf [28.11.2021].

³⁸ CBSS, *Project Support Facility (PSF)*, <https://cbss.org/psf/> [28.11.2021].

³⁹ P. Aalto et al., *The coordination of policy priorities among regional institutions from the Baltic Sea to the Arctic: the institutions – coordination dilemma*, "Journal of Baltic Studies" 2017, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 142-144.

in all international institutions⁴⁰. The aversion of this state to the EUSBSR made this strategy a mechanism incapable of assisting Russia's transformation and increased the risk of further politicization of EU-Russia relations in the BSR – a process contrary to the creation of a regional security community⁴¹. According to Ch. Browning, at a geostrategic level, the consequences for the EU and the BSR as a whole were even worse. While the EU lost, to a significant extent, its transformative power, the BSR were gradually dividing into an “EU's inside and outside” and became conceptualised in less inclusive terms⁴². The risk of excluding EU non-member states spurred a debate early on about the need to create new bodies that could implement the strategy.

Next, the importance of the CBSS for the EUSBSR began to increase, and in the revised action plans of February 2013 and June 2015, the CBSS was consequently integrated into the governance architecture of the Strategy. In the 2013 Action Plan, in which the Commission defined three overall objectives for the EUSBSR, namely ‘Save the Sea’, ‘Connect the Region’, and ‘Increase Prosperity’, the CBSS was not only involved in the implementation of flagship projects but it also bore responsibility for coordination of some Horizontal Actions (HAs) and Policy Areas (PA). Since 2013, the CBSS Secretariat has coordinated the PA ‘Secure’ status, focusing on civil protection cooperation (together with Sweden), and two HAs, namely ‘Neighbours’, aimed at improving cooperation with EU neighbouring states (to-

⁴⁰ A. Makarychev, A. Sergunin, *Russia's role in regional cooperation and the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)*, “Journal of Baltic Studies” 2017, vol. 48, no. 4, p. 466.

⁴¹ M. Ekengren, *A return*, op. cit., p. 512.

⁴² Ch. S. Browning, *Experimenting...*, p. 407.

gether with the City of Turku), and 'Sustainable development and bio-economy' (together with the Nordic Council of Ministers). But, from the point of view of practising the day-to-day activities of the CBSS, the ability to apply for project funding has proven to be much more important. For an intergovernmental organisation such as the CBSS, project thinking has required quite a significant change in terms of how things are done. Indeed, according to the ToR, it is the CSO which is responsible for overseeing the day-to-day activities of the CBSS. However, in the implementation of many projects by the CBSS within the EUSBSR (Balticlab, Youth Dialogue, CBSS Summer University, etc.) this rule might result in conflict with the project approach. Consequently, the CSO decided to change the rules, which allowed the Director General to have a stronger position in the decision-making process regarding the involvement and implementation of individual projects⁴³.

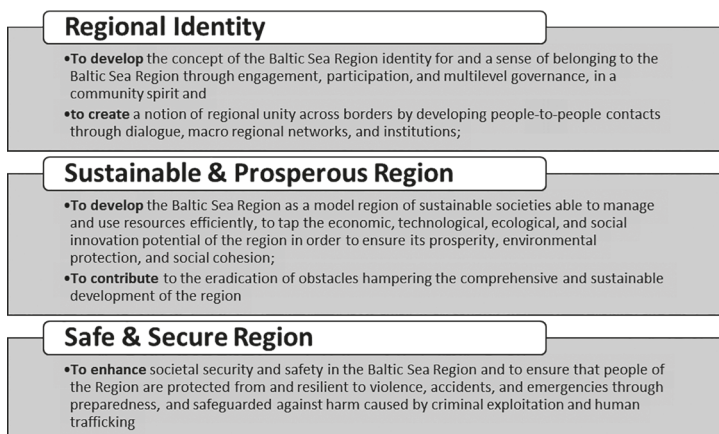
Thus, the CBSS was transforming into a more project-oriented organisation, moving away from its previous role of providing a venue for peaceful dialogue around the Baltic Sea, and providing assistance to the former Eastern Bloc states. This meant that, on the one hand, the CBSS Secretariat gained a certain autonomy in defining the projects it would be involved in, while on the other hand there was a growing risk that subsequent actions taken by the Secretariat in sourcing and managing projects (and thus fitting in

⁴³ S. Gänzle, *The European Union's Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR): improving multilevel governance in Baltic Sea cooperation?*, "Journal of Baltic Studies" 2017, vol. 48, no. 4, pp. 412-414.

with the expectations of the project-financing institutions) would conflict with the expectations of the member states.

The importance of the EUSBSR for the reform of the CBSS is clearly visible, especially when comparing the EUSBSR's three objectives with the new CBSS long-term priorities, adopted on 20 June 2014, as shown in Figure 5. The member states decision to reduce the organisation's priorities from five to three showed that, at least in general, they still supported its activity, which filled a regional gap of a shortage of coherent multilateral actors in the BSR⁴⁴.

Figure 5. The CBSS long-term priorities and goals, 2014-today



Source: Own study based on CBSS (2014), *Decision by the Council of the Baltic Sea States on a review of the CBSS long term priorities*, 20 June 2014, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/decision-on-cbss-long-term-priorities-20140620-adopted.pdf> [25.11.2021].

⁴⁴ T. Etzold, *Structures and Modes of Regional Cooperation*, [in:] *The Baltic Sea Region: A Comprehensive Guide: History, Politics, Culture and Economy of a European Role Model*, B. Henningsen, T. Etzold, K. Hanne (eds), Berlin 2017, p. 176.

These long-term priorities were adopted through silent procedure because the real problem for regional cooperation and the CBSS itself arose outside the BSR, namely in the conflict with Russia over the illegal annexation of Crimea. Russia's actions in eastern Ukraine have severely challenged the regional institutions, putting into question their ability to build a stable region across existing dividing lines. A majority of BSR states rejected the possibility of participating in the 10th BSS Summit, which Finland was planning to host in Turku on 4-5 June 2014, therefore, the meeting was not convened. Because several states in the BSR were unable to get over Russia's actions in Ukraine, and eventually return to the status quo ante in the region, the annual CBSS Ministerial Sessions were cancelled from 2014 to 2017. On the other hand, Russia tried to convince the states of the region, especially the Nordics, to pursue a "business as usual" policy. It pointed out that any conflicts in the BSR should be resolved within the already existing framework, like the CBSS. This increase in the importance of dialogue and cooperation (at least at the declarative layer) is evidence of Russia's desire to maintain its influence and pragmatic relations wherever possible⁴⁵.

Events and challenges outside the BSR put the CBSS through its toughest test ever. The breakthrough only came in June 2017, when Iceland organised a meeting of Foreign Ministers on the 25th anniversary of the CBSS. However, signs of improvement were already visible earlier – on 8 June 2016, when the first meeting in three years at

⁴⁵ K.-A. Eggen, *Russia's strategy towards the Nordic region: Tracing continuity and change*, "Journal of Strategic Studies" 2021, DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2021.1873781, pp. 1-42.

a high level took place in Warsaw. In the adopted Warsaw Declaration, the CBSS Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs noted that in such uncertain times, it is a matter of fundamental responsibility for Member States to reaffirm the core role of the CBSS for multilateral intergovernmental cooperation and structured dialogue in the BSR. The protection of stability and the pursuit of prosperity, emphasised so often by line ministers in areas such as culture, tourism, and science, should guide further discussions around the vision for the BSR beyond 2020⁴⁶. These actions were welcomed by the other BSR states, including German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, according to whom the CBSS was to be revitalised as a forum for dialogue across the divides between Europe and Russia, using everyday common challenges in the BSR as an arena for “confidence building”⁴⁷.

In subsequent years, the task of adapting the CBSS to new global challenges was taken up by successive CBSS presidencies. In June 2017, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the CBSS member states authorized the Baltic 2030 Action Plan, a vision for a regional response to the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals through transnational collaboration⁴⁸. But before the whole process got off the ground, on the basis of the

⁴⁶ CBSS (2016), *Warsaw Declaration: Regional responses to Global Challenges*, Warsaw, 8 June 2016, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CBSS-Warsaw-Declaration-8-June-2016.pdf> [27.11.2021].

⁴⁷ A. Schmidt-Felzmann, K. Engelbrekt, *Challenges in the Baltic Sea region: geopolitics, insecurity and identity*, “Global Affairs” 2018, vol. 4, no. 4-5, p. 450.

⁴⁸ S. Beyersdorff, E. Lanthén, *Baltic 2030 Bumps on the Road: How the Baltic Sea States are performing on the SDGs*, Copenhagen 2018, https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Baltic-2030_Bumps-on-the-Road_FINAL.pdf [27.11.2021].

2017 Reykjavik Declaration, an independent group of twelve “wise persons” was tasked with examining the future role of the organisation⁴⁹. The main outcome of their work was the final report entitled “Vision for the Baltic Sea Region beyond 2020” presented in May 2018, which contained numerous indications of the necessary reforms that would allow for increasing the weight of the CBSS in political dialogue as well as developing practical cooperation in the BSR. According to this vision, on the 50th anniversary of the CBSS in 2042, the region will be presented as a model for cooperative regional relations. This applies both to the norms in force and to the actions implemented by states and non-state actors on four levels: ecological, economic, social, and security⁵⁰. The authors of the report expressed their conviction that the CBSS could still play a key role in the region. In the face of growing international tensions, its unique membership is of particular importance, as no other regional cooperation format includes the EU member states, non-EU states such as Russia, Norway, and Iceland, and the EU itself (represented by the EC). This gives the CBSS a comparative advantage which enables it to initiate and support the development of regional cooperation on both a plane and a level tailored to the needs of its member states. The CBSS has used these opportunities on numerous occasions in the past, enabling Member States to cooperate in areas such as nuclear security or respect for the rights of

⁴⁹ CBSS (2017), *Declaration on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)*, Reykjavik, 20 June 2017, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/The-Reykjavik-Declaration.pdf> [27.11.2021].

⁵⁰ CBSS (2018), *Vision for the Baltic Sea Region Beyond 2020*, 9 May 2018, <https://cbss.org/publications/vision-for-the-baltic-sea-region-beyond-2020/> [27.11.2021].

national minorities. With these considerations in mind, the members of the group formulated seven key recommendations in relation to:

1. Dialogue and Communication: the CBSS should remain a stable forum for high-level political dialogue and exchange of information on common problems;
2. Sustaining High-level Political Contacts: the CBSS should play a supportive role in organizing meetings of Heads of State or Government with the restriction that these meetings would not take place within the context of the CBSS, and which will provide political guidance to all regional cooperation structures;
3. Role of Secretariat: the existing resources and capacities of the CBSS Secretariat in Stockholm should be developed so that it can prepare strategic expertise on key regional issues and challenges;
4. Funding: the financing of the CBSS activities should correspond to increased demands of its member states regarding the CBSS involvement in the development and implementation of projects, as well as fundraising;
5. Other regional actors: the CBSS Secretariat, which has the best understanding of the activities of other structures in the BSR, should present an analysis and operational audit on the possibilities for creating regional synergies;
6. EU and Russian Strategies for the Baltic Sea region – synergies: the CBSS should work towards convergence of the regional strategies of the EU and Russia;

7. Belarus: practical cooperation with Belarus in the fields of environmental protection, education, and civil protection should be intensified, and Belarus' membership in the CBSS should be considered in the future⁵¹.

On the basis of this report, the BSR states, at their meeting in Stockholm in 2018, decided on the future reform of the CBSS. The conclusions of the report indicate that there was an ambition, comparable to that which accompanied the creation of the CBSS in 1992, to utilise the cooperative practices that were developed during the preceding two decades. However, the geostrategic conditions were radically different. At the time of the Russian military aggression in Ukraine and the remilitarisation of the BSR, the initiative to build trust with Russia was extremely complicated. The EU states did not trust Russia, especially as they have become the target of Russian aggression in the information space⁵².

Based on the report of the Vision Group, the main directions for the reform of the CBSS were developed during the Swedish Presidency (1 July 2017 – 30 June 2018). On 18 June 2018, these were accepted by the foreign ministers and senior representatives of the CBSS member states and the EU. The Stockholm Declaration indicated that the CBSS reform process should be finished by 2020. The incoming presidencies should drive the reform efforts based on three main assumptions: 1) to increase the focus and flexibility

⁵¹ Ibidem; D. Szacawa, *Reforma Rady Państw Morza Bałtyckiego głównym zadaniem prezydencji Danii*, „Komentarze IEŚ” 2019, no. 53, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/reforma-rady-panstw-morza-baltyckiego-glownym-zadaniem-prezydencji-danii/> [28.11.2021].

⁵² A. Schmidt-Felzmann, K. Engelbrekt, op. cit., p. 451.

of the CBSS activities; 2) to improve cooperation with other international structures active in the BSR, and; 3) to enable concrete results in areas where the CBSS is uniquely equipped to bring added value⁵³.

⁵³ CBSS (2018), *Stockholm Declaration*, Stockholm, 18 June 2018, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Stockholm-Declaration-June-18-2018.pdf> [28.11.2021].



5. The last reform of the CBSS: back to political relevance (2019-)

The evaluation of the recommendations presented in Stockholm in June 2018, and further work on determining how they should be implemented, were one of the main challenges faced by the CBSS Latvian Presidency (1 July 2018 – 30 June 2019). The result of this work was the adoption of the Jurmala Declaration and the approval of the so-called Roadmap of the CBSS reform, which took place on 3 June 2019 during an annual meeting. The 2019 Jurmala Declaration constitutes a mandate for the CSO to complete the reform process by the end of the forthcoming Danish Presidency (June 2020). On a more practical level, the CBSS Project Support Facility was extended till 2022, which should improve the CBSS visibility⁵⁴.

⁵⁴ CBSS (2019), *Jurmala Declaration*, Jurmala, 3 June 2019, https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Jurmala-Declaration_FINAL_29.05.2019.pdf [28.11.2021].

The so-called roadmap, on the other hand, contains a description of concrete actions along with how to implement them. This CBSS reform required amendments to the “ToR” of both the CBSS and the CBSS Secretariat. Both documents were from 2009, therefore, some detailed provisions on the functioning of the CBSS organisation as well as its Secretariat needed to be updated. According to the CSO, these changes will allow the CBSS to adjust its format and level of meetings between the Member States and the EU to ensure the greatest possible efficiency with regard to the discussed issues. This means that the frequency of the BSS Summits will be determined by developments in the BSR, and the continuity of political dialogue will be ensured by Council meetings. In addition, greater activity of the CBSS in relations with other regional structures (the so-called structural dialogue) will allow for a more effective exchange of information and experiences. Moreover, it should also strengthen cohesion, which in turn will translate into avoiding overlapping of competences and activities of regional actors⁵⁵.

The first and foremost challenge for the BSR states was the change of attitude towards Russia, which was increasingly treated not as an important partner for solving regional challenges, but more as an adversary in the BSR. This hindered progress and consensus and brought into question whether regional issues can indeed serve as a platform for engagement between EU and NATO states and Russia. And if so, can a regional organisation such as the CBSS be used to develop

⁵⁵ CBSS (2019), *Roadmap of the CBSS reforms 2018-2020*, Jurmala, 3 June 2019, https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Roadmap_CBSS-reforms_FINAL_29.05.2019.pdf [28.11.2021].

a common vision? Several years after Crimea's annexation into Russia, few states in the region were clearly distancing themselves from cooperation with Russia, and there was a lack of political will to make progress on regional issues. Thus, there was a high risk that practical and bottom-up cooperation around the Baltic Sea would necessarily be severely limited, with conflicts prevailing in the medium and long term⁵⁶.

The main phase of completing the CBSS reform was under the Danish Presidency (1 July 2019 – 30 June 2020), which, as Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod expressed, felt particularly obliged to emphasise the importance of the CBSS as a forum for regional dialogue and a place to build mutual trust. The minister pointed out that the planned reform should also prevent the duplication of regional structures so that public funds are spent more efficiently. Equally important was a review of the activities of these working structures of the CBSS, whose mandates and related action strategies were about to end. This concerned the EGMP (mandate expired at the end of 2019), and the Expert Group on Children at Risk and the Task Force against Trafficking in Human beings (both mandates expired at the end of 2020)⁵⁷.

Completion of the CBSS reform was further hampered by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic – the whole world faced this huge challenge in early 2020. The states in the BSR, especially the Nordic ones, were expected to act in solidarity. However, this did not happen, instead, individual states took isolated actions, uncoordinated with each oth-

⁵⁶ A. Schmidt-Felzmann, K. Engelbrekt, op. cit., p. 457.

⁵⁷ D. Szacawa, *Reforma Rady Państw Morza Bałtyckiego głównym zadaniem prezydencji Danii*, "Komentarze IES" 2019, no. 53, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/reforma-rady-panstw-morza-baltyckiego-glownym-zadaniem-prezydencji-danii/> [28.11.2021].

er (Sweden, in particular stood, out in this regard), limiting themselves to issuing only joint political messages at the beginning of the crisis, referring only to regional solidarity in already existing areas of cooperation⁵⁸. In this highly unpredictable environment, the meeting of foreign ministers, initially planned in a traditional form in Bornholm, took place in cyberspace. This decision was announced in April 2020 and enabled full participation of all 11 of the Baltic Sea Region's Foreign Ministers (including Germany and the Russian Federation) as well as the Secretary-General of the EU's European External Action Service (EEAS)⁵⁹.

This meeting once again confirmed that a reformed CBSS remains desirable for member states, especially in the context of resuming political dialogue. Ministers highlighted various issues, for example, J. Kofod, in opening the video-conference, pointed out that the added value of the CBSS for the development of the BSR stems, *inter alia*, from the functional combination of political intergovernmental dialogue with practical cooperation among all Member States in the BSR. Agreeing with him, representatives of other States stressed the need to maintain a flexible regional institution to strengthen multilateralism, and thereby facilitate mutual understanding, build trust and stability, and promote direct contact between communities. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergei Lavrov, even called on

⁵⁸ Å. Hansson, C. Brokelind, *COVID-19 Nordic Responses*, "Intertax" 2020, vol. 48, no. 8/9, pp. 754-760.

⁵⁹ D. Szacawa, *New hopes for enhanced cooperation within the reformed Council of the Baltic Sea States*, "IES Commentaries" 2020, no. 203 (106/2020), <https://ies.lublin.pl/en/comments/new-hopes-for-enhanced-cooperation-within-the-reformed-council-of-the-baltic-sea-states-damian-szacawa/> [28.11.2021].

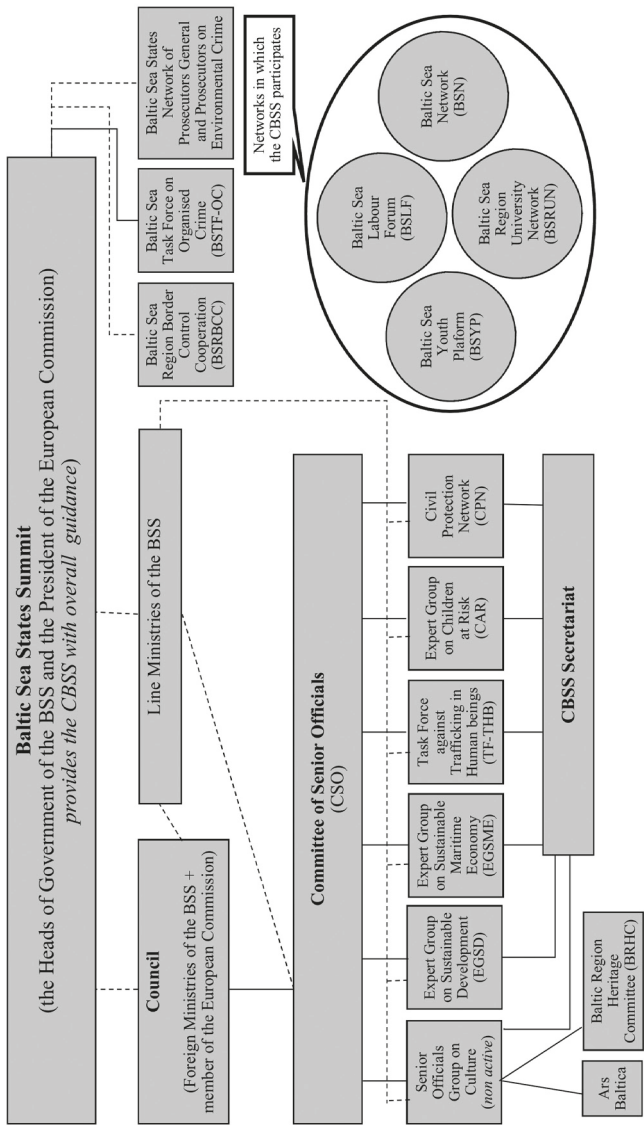
other Foreign Ministries to “re-open” cross-border dialogue, trying as much as possible to keep quiet about uncomfortable events. Finally, Member States agreed on the content of the current core documents: the CBSS “ToR”⁶⁰, and the CBSS Secretariat “ToR”⁶¹. The two-year process of reforming the organisation, initiated by Sweden in June 2018, was completed, and at the end of 2021, the structure of the CBSS looks as shown in Figure 6.

The CBSS present structure corresponds very well with its long-term priorities and goals and is mainly visible in the areas of non-military threats to international security, that are focused on the economic (including energy), ecological, and social levels. These areas define issues of expert groups and task forces complementing the regional political cooperation with a sectoral dimension supported by line ministries of the CBSS Member States. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, in the case of different national strategies to limit the detrimental effects of the crisis, regional cooperation in crisis management is also important. Therefore, future stronger cooperation between the CBSS and networks operating under the BSS Summits auspices, for example, the Baltic Sea Task Force on Organised Crime (BSTF-OC), the Baltic Sea Region Border Control Collaboration (BSRBCC), or Baltic Sea States Networks of Prosecutors General and Prosecutors on Environmental Crime (ENPRO), is needed.

⁶⁰ CBSS (2020), *Council of the Baltic Sea States Terms of Reference*, 19 May 2020, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Council-of-the-Baltic-Sea-States-Terms-of-Reference.pdf> [28.11.2021].

⁶¹ CBSS (2020), *Terms of Reference of the Secretariat of the Council of the Baltic Sea States*, 19 May 2020, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Council-of-the-Baltic-Sea-States-Secretariat-Terms-of-Reference.pdf> [28.11.2021].

Figure 6. Organisational structure of the Council of the Baltic Sea States in 2021



Source: Own study based on the CBSS webpage, <https://cbss.org/> [1.12.2021].

The COVID-19 pandemic could also have negative effects on children and adolescents. Therefore, the extension (till 2025) of mandates of the existing working structures – the EG-CAR and the TF-THB – should be seen positively, especially since the effects of their past operations are appreciated beyond the BSR. Moreover, a number of cross-cutting issues arose at the intersection of ‘regional identity’, ‘sustainable and prosperous region’, and ‘safe and secure region’. All of them could be solved or mitigated through cooperation in scientific research (science for diplomacy), or more generally, promotion of higher education cooperation (diplomacy for science), which has often been a priority of CBSS presidencies⁶². In the light of new arrangements, the importance of the CBSS Secretariat in Stockholm will also increase. The traditional mandate of the Secretariat is to provide technical and organisational support to the Chairman of the CBSS and the structures and working bodies of the Council as well as to ensure continuity and enhanced coordination of CBSS activities. Now, its tasks have been extended, i.e., by the possibility of initiating activities, promoting objectives, and implementing priorities agreed upon by the Council (after approval of the Committee of Senior Officials). Therefore, it will be crucial to use regional synergies and conduct a structural dialogue with other cooperation formats in Northern Europe (mainly regional intergovernmental councils – the Arctic Council, the Nordic Council of Ministers, and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council).

⁶² S. Ewert, *Higher Education Cooperation and Networks in the Baltic Sea Region: A Basis for Regionalization and Region Building?*, “Journal of Baltic Studies” 2013, vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 95-116.

When evaluating the last CBSS reform, it should also be noted that several challenges remained for the Council. An essential element of the CBSS reform is to increase its flexibility and pragmatism. Meetings at the level of the Heads of State and Government (the so-called BSS Summits) will be organized only if the weight of the decision would require it. After the annexation of Crimea, states must not forget about military threats, as emphasized during the video-conference in May 2020, by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland, Jacek Czaputowicz, who pointed to military incidents, expanded military capabilities in the Kaliningrad Oblast, or hybrid actions (disinformation, cyber-attacks, and hostile rhetoric)⁶³. Moreover, there are also challenges coming from the fact that the BSR does not operate in isolation from cooperation within the EU and its politics, like the European Green Deal. This means that the CBSS, in addition to the existing involvement in sustainable development and climate change, would probably have to strengthen the regional cooperation networks in relation to the circular economy, 'green' industry, and ecological tourism as well as the involvement of young people in the political affairs of the region in the BSR.

As a next step in the CBSS reform, an assessment of the organisation's performance to date in implementing the assumptions of the 2010 Vilnius Declaration "A Vision of the Baltic Sea Region until 2020" was prepared. It showed that twelve benchmarks for the region were met partially by gov-

⁶³ MFA Poland, *Council of the Baltic Sea States foreign ministers hold video conference*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/council-of-the-baltic-sea-states-foreign-ministers-hold-video-conference> [29.11.2021].

ernments' commitments. In several areas, regional achievements remained behind expectations (for example, in terms of regional identity and extended use of clean and renewable energy), while in others, gaps and fragmentation are also visible (Baltic fisheries, development of innovation-driven technology, construction of energy infrastructure like "Nord-Stream 2")⁶⁴. Conclusions from the assessment served the CSO and the CBSS Lithuanian Presidency (1 July 2020 – 30 June 2021) during the preparation of a new document – the "Vilnius II Declaration – a Vision for the Baltic Sea Region by 2030", adopted by the CBSS Foreign Ministers and high-level representatives on 1 June 2021. In the Vilnius II Declaration, the CBSS Member States once again declared their political will to use the strengths of the organisation to transform the BSR into "one of the most sustainable, prosperous, innovative, and competitive regions in the world". The number of benchmarks was reduced to ten, including upholding the rule of law, democracy, and respect for human rights; the presence of a strong, well-functioning, and multi-level governance structure for political dialogue, practical cooperation, and people-to-people contacts; youth involvement; improvement of the ecological health of the Baltic Sea; further development of green transition towards climate neutrality; full recovery from the COVID pandemic; a high level of digitalization that brings profit to society and protects it from cyber threats and disinformation; more intensified regional cooperation in crises management,

⁶⁴ Ž. Ozoliņa, T. Etzold, *Reflection Paper on the Vilnius Declaration: A Vision for the Baltic Sea Region by 2020*, 2020, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/reflection-paper.pdf> [29.11.2021].

including civil protection, fighting organised crime, and protection of children at risk; closer cooperation in education, science, and research; and finally, well functioning bottom-up cultural networks⁶⁵.

Specific actions to achieve the objectives of the Vilnius II Declaration are included in the four-year CBSS Action Plan. The 13 actions have been grouped and assigned to one of the long-term priorities of the CBSS. Their guiding principle is to deliver concrete results in areas in which CBSS cooperation is well prepared to add value, including cooperation with other international formats in the BSR⁶⁶. The CSO has the authority to review the list of activities and, if deemed appropriate, may add new ones that relate to the agreed tasks. Their implementation and reporting are the responsibility of the Director-General of the Secretariat (since September 2020, the new Director General is Grzegorz Marek Poznański, a former Polish ambassador).

⁶⁵ CBSS (2021), *Vilnius II Declaration – A Vision for the Baltic Sea Region by 2030*, Vilnius, 1 June 2021, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/vilnius-ii-declaration.pdf> [1.12.2021].

⁶⁶ CBSS (2021), *From Policy to Action!: CBSS Action Plan 2021-2025*, 21 May 2021, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/cbss-action-plan.pdf> [1.12.2021].



Conclusions

The CBSS, for a very long time, was a unique organisation, bringing together at one table a broad spectrum of members – alongside the EC, there were the EU's Member States, the European Economic Area's Member States, states aspiring to the EU, and Russia. Despite the CBSS being described as a “soft” international organisation, in which the Council communiques or declarations do not create legal obligations for its member states, the CBSS underwent a process of gradual institutionalisation during the 1990s and 2010s. In the first half of the 1990s and 2010s, most of the institutional structures of the CBSS were established, both at intergovernmental and non-governmental levels. This process was accompanied by increasing the role of the BSR as a region of intense and multi-level international interaction, largely resulting from the transformation process of Poland and the Baltic states, and their integration into the EU and NATO.

However, already after the end of this process, and with the normalization and détente in relations between Russia and its neighbours, the region almost disappeared from

the political agenda. At the beginning of the 21st century, the BSR was relegated to the role of an arena of minor importance for intergovernmental cooperation in the EU and NATO, and thus it remained a major challenge for the CBSS to maintain the attention of decision-makers at higher political levels. At the same time, it was a period of intense development of bottom-up cooperation and implementation of practical activities, stimulated by sub-regional authorities and sectoral ministries, using existing CBSS cooperation networks. The relative loss of importance of the CBSS was also due to the development of EU regional initiatives – the ND framework and the EUSBSR, funded by the EU and managed by the EC from Brussels.

Its adaptability to the international reality in the BSR is noticed through consistently formulated visions and programmes for cooperation in all spheres of activity. Moreover, the 1992 Copenhagen Declaration, the 2010 Vilnius Declaration, and the 2021 Vilnius 2 Declaration proved that the evolution of international relations in the BSR, which forced the CBSS to adapt to the new international environment, were met by the CBSS Member States. Despite opinions appearing from time to time saying that the CBSS has already fulfilled its tasks, the organisation is still needed for them to build collaboration and trust in the BSR. It is even more important in current times when the EU-Russia relations are cool following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The CBSS was gradually marginalised, but the last reform process in 2018-2020 seems to have been successful. There is a political will to conduct political relations and exchange information between states in the BSR, using the CBSS as a “neutral arena”. Therefore, the CBSS once again has proved

that it could add value to regional governance as an inter-governmental organisation.

After the reforms of the CBSS, some of its internal structures ceased to exist, some changed their name, others were created, leading to a significant institutionalisation of the organisation. It should be noted that the expert groups (former working groups), which have been functioning practically from the beginning, and other different networks and task forces, have a strictly defined and pragmatic character. The latest reform completed in 2020 also emphasizes the increased role and importance of the CBSS in the BSR. The CBSS reform was a two-year process, during which representatives of the Member States had intensive discussions and were confronted with numerous pieces of evidence of the usefulness of the CBSS, especially with regard to the implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals at the BSR level, countering non-military threats to international security (organised crime, human trafficking), and building a common space around the Baltic Sea for the development of culture, science and regional identity.

Despite the fact that the next presidency of Poland in the CBSS will not come until 2026-2027, particular attention should already be paid to the possibility of intensifying cooperation in the BSR. After the CBSS was reformed, its activity is in line with Poland's Foreign Policy Strategy 2017-2021, assuming the strengthening of cooperation with the Baltic and Nordic states, and more effective use of existing structures of multilateral cooperation.



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The Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) was established in March 1992 to ensure a regional forum for political dialogue among states from both sides of the former Iron Curtain. During almost three decades, the CBSS has evolved from a loose intergovernmental cooperation in 1992, to a regional intergovernmental organisation with a well-developed institutional structure by the end of 2021. Five stages in the evolution of the CBSS have been identified during which the organizational structure and the scope of activities undertaken were adapted to the change in the international environment.

After the last reform in 2020, the CBSS is still an important forum for regional political dialogue based on a more flexible and pragmatic formula. The CBSS is well prepared to participate in a regional governance model, as it is a highly institutionalised regional intergovernmental organisation that has acquired outstanding expertise in areas such as civil security and sustainable development, and is responsible also for developing bottom-up initiatives involving private actors around the Baltic Sea.

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