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Organizational sanctions: suspension of cooperation with Russia in the Baltic Sea Region

Russia's aggression against Ukraine is a blatant violation of the fundamental principles of international law, which many international institutions in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) refer to. By deciding to suspend the participation of Russia and Belarus in these regional cooperation structures, the BSR states have demonstrated that they exclude cooperation with the aggressor. The ostracism resulting from the organizational sanctions introduced will result in the long-term freezing of political contacts, which will be difficult to rebuild at the regional as well as local levels.

The reaction of regional cooperation structures in the BSR. The sanctions imposed on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine are multifaceted, encompassing economic, energy, and diplomatic dimensions (see ["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 539 – p. 1](#) and ["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 540 – p. 2](#)). The latter aspect is the most apparent, as diplomatic sanctions undermine Russia's international position, thus causing significant damage to its global and regional image.

In the BSR, the first institution which reacted was the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC). As early as 25 February, a statement by the chairman and vice-chairman of the BSPC condemned the unjustified military attack and invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. Pyry Niemi and Johannes Schraps stressed that this aggression constituted a violation of international law and human rights, compliance with which is the basis of regional parliamentary cooperation. This position was subsequently supported by delegates from ten national parliaments, five regional parliaments and three parliamentary organizations, who decided in a declaration on 12 March to suspend the participation of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation (two chambers: the State Duma and the Federation Council) and four regional parliaments (Kaliningrad Region, Karelian Republic, Leningrad Region, and the City of St. Petersburg) in the annual conference, meetings of working bodies, deliberations, works, and projects of the BSPC.

On 3 March 2022, after swift consultations between the foreign ministries of the ten member states of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, a statement on the suspension of Russia and Belarus from the work of the CBSS was issued by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway, which currently chairs the organisation. The document stressed that Russia, following its armed aggression, must not benefit from any cooperation within the CBSS. Over the past thirty years, the Council has manifested itself in numerous activities and projects carried out at various levels and covering regional identity, a sustainable and prosperous region, and a safe and secure region (see ["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 53](#)). The significance of this step is demonstrated by the very fact that the next day, it was responded to by the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Maria Zakharova, who highlighted the achievements of the CBSS to date in promoting practical solutions in the BSR.

International law and the CBSS decision. International law, which involves the founding agreements of international organizations, indicates the legal norms defining the principles of the creation and functioning of intergovernmental organizations. An important element of this branch of law is the norms governing organisational sanctions imposed on a member state for its behaviour contrary to the founding act, including, inter alia, suspension of membership rights and privileges, and expulsion of the member from the organisation.

While the CBSS is not a typical international organisation and does not have a treaty setting out the conditions and modalities for the imposition of sanctions aimed at correcting the behaviour of one of its member states, there are references to other instruments of international law in several policy documents, including the 1992 Copenhagen Declaration, underlying cooperation within the CBSS. It points out that this organization is based on the principles of the United Nations Charter, as well as documents developed at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, such as the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe. As a result of Russia's

invasion of Ukraine, the objectives and principles of cooperation set out in these documents have been violated, which consequently makes further cooperation in the region impossible.

There was also criticism of the behaviour of Belarus (which has observer status in the CBSS), which, by making its territory available to Russia for a military invasion, became a party to the conflict and responsible for the very act of aggression against Ukraine. Therefore, it was decided to suspend cooperation with Belarus, at least until it can be recommenced in line with the fundamental principles of international law.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine stands in clear contradiction to international political norms, which have been shaped by, among other things, the functioning of regional cooperation structures. The political declarations adopted by these structures create the so-called soft law, which is perceived as informal rules determining the standards of expected behaviour in the international environment. Therefore, although they do not constitute sources of international law, failure to observe them may have specific consequences, and the suspension of cooperation with Russia and Belarus is an example of this.

More permanent freezing of political contacts with Russia. Regional cooperation in the BSR became more difficult after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Most of the states in the region rejected the opportunity to participate in the 10th Baltic Sea States Summit, which Finland had planned to hold in Turku on 4-5 June 2014, and as a result, the meeting did not take place. In the following years, the annual ministerial sessions of the CBSS were cancelled, so a multilateral regional political dialogue at the highest level became impossible – the states of the region did not agree with Russia's violation of international law and expected a return to the quo ante situation in the region.

Russia tried to convince the states of the region, especially the Nordic states, to pursue a "business as usual" policy, and thus maintain its influence within the existing frameworks. Chilly relations were also evident in bilateral relations, e.g. Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg did not visit Russia until April 2019. In recent years, attempts to normalise relations have been evident, stemming mainly from the belief that dialogue at the political level is necessary. This dialogue has strengthened the implementation of practical projects in the north of the continent, such as regulation of fishing, local cooperation, and effective search and rescue operations at sea.

The consequence of Russia's aggression against Ukraine will also freeze cross-border contacts at the local level. On 8 March 2022, the European Commission announced the suspension of cooperation with Russia and Belarus. This covered nine EU programmes under the 2014-2020 European Neighbourhood Instrument and the new programming period for 2021-2027, as well as the Interreg Baltic Sea Region transnational cooperation programme. This is an acute consequence because, according to mid-2021 data, among the states of the region, Russian partners were most strongly represented in this programme. Many projects have been implemented in recent years covering a wide spectrum of social life, from culture and education through environmental protection to innovation and business development. They have fostered awareness among local communities of current regional issues and supported sustainable social and economic development.

Conclusions and perspectives

- Regional organisations in the BSR are interconnected, often complementing each other's activities. In most cases, the decision to suspend the Russian and Belarusian partners was taken in the first week after the fighting started in Ukraine. All structures of regional cooperation in the BSR, both intergovernmental (e.g. CBSS, BSPC, the Helsinki Commission – HELCOM) and regional (Visions and Strategies around the Baltic Sea – VASAB, Baltic Sea States Subregional Cooperation – BSSSC), opted for such a step. Consequently, Russia and Belarus do not participate in cooperation at the local or regional level, despite the protests of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.
- After Russia invaded Ukraine, it will be difficult for politicians from the BSR states to conduct high-level dialogue with Russia again. The plans to develop bilateral cooperation that the new Norwegian government, elected after the September 2021 elections, had will have to be revised. Nevertheless, over time there will be attempts to return to local dialogue concerning the so-called High North issues, i.e. the European part of the Arctic and the Barents Sea region.

- Cooperation at the local and regional levels in recent years has often been presented as an example of constructive relations with Russia and Belarus, making it possible to directly influence civil society in both states. Despite the suspension of Russia and Belarus, and thus the lack of opportunities for such influence, Baltic cooperation among the other states will be maintained because of its other advantages.
- In this context, the experience gained so far and the effects of practical cooperation in the CBSS, e.g. in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, will become particularly important. In addition, cooperation for the creation of a secure and stable region will contribute to the coordination of assistance to refugees from war-torn Ukraine arriving in the CBSS member states.