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# The Baltic Sea Region after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Edited by  
Damian Szacawa and Kazimierz Musiał



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Damian Szacawa and Kazimierz Musiał

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## Résumé

### **Changing the regional identity of the Baltic Sea Region**

- Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 marks a new era in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). This critical juncture triggers an increasing perception of insecurity among the regional stakeholders, and leads to profound changes in the identification patterns in and among the BSR states. The post-1989 equilibrium is punctuated and a new categorization of the region's peoples and states into "Us" and "Them" produces new identity narratives. The friendly narratives upon which a Baltic Sea regionalism including Russia has been constructed for over three decades give way to hostile narratives in which Russia projects its Baltic Sea neighbours as antagonistic Others while the rest of the BSR states engage in a reciprocal process of "othering" the aggressive Russia.



- Collective memories of the loss of land, lives, and livelihood at the hands of Soviet aggression in the Second World War again become valid arguments in Finland, the Baltic States, and Poland, while in Germany we observe a radical confrontation with the habitualized principle of “Russia first” that used to be characteristic for this country’s attitudes towards its Eastern and Baltic neighbours.
- The use of military force caused discursive chaos and cognitive dissonance in all institutional arrangements and organizations in the BSR where Russia was a partner. Studying current development through the prism of critical junctures or punctuated equilibrium theories makes it possible to overcome the uncertainty and comprehend current discursive fluidity as an opportunity for institutional responses. At the same time, it is apparent that the ideology of the Russian World that includes notions of national greatness in contrast to its neighbours is detrimental to BSR cooperation and is absolutely at odds with the ideas, values, and statements underlying the contemporary social imaginary of the peaceful Baltic World. The war does irreparable damage to the previously established institutional and ideational setting for an inclusive BSR, bringing about a lasting change to the ontology of Baltic Sea regionalism.
- The 2022 critical juncture (Russia’s invasion of Ukraine) is affecting both the practice of national foreign and security policies of states belonging to the BSR, like Germany, Finland, and Sweden and the activity of the main regional intergovernmental organization – the

Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). The changes in foreign and security policies among the BSR states stem from the simple fact that Russia is recognized as the number one enemy. Changing perceptions of Russia have contributed to the fact that the states of the region have had no choice but to take a series of measures to adapt to the new international reality, both at the level of defence policy and in the identity dimension, which will most likely lead to changes in ideologies, imaginaries, and ontologies in the future.

- Russia's aggression against Ukraine is a blatant violation of the fundamental principles of international law, which many international institutions in the 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.

### **New impetus for regional cooperation required: The implications of Russia's war in Ukraine for the Baltic Sea Region**

- With Russia's war in Ukraine, regional cooperation across the BSR reached a watershed. Modern regional cooperation has experienced several ups and downs in its 30-year history since the end of the Cold War and faced various challenges, but this time the situation is different and more severe. At all levels of BSR

cooperation, the involvement of Russia or Russian stakeholders has been suspended for the foreseeable future. This was justified and without alternative.

- In turn, these measures have direct consequences for regional cooperation in the BSR and wider Northern Europe. All regional bodies and their stakeholders need to take the new reality into account and accordingly adapt to the altered circumstances. This reorientation process in various regional bodies has started but is far from being concluded. Regional cooperation requires not only a new definition, orientation, and legitimization but also flexibility and staying power.
- While this reorientation process is far from easy, the exclusion of Russian stakeholders offers chances for a new type of even more effective regional cooperation with opportunities for it to become deeper and wider, for example by involving Ukraine as an adjacent country more closely in the cooperation. For this to happen, it will be important to bring the political dimension back in more strongly. A Baltic Sea Summit, bringing the heads of government of all littoral countries together in 2023, might be useful as a signal of will and commitment to future regional cooperation from the highest political level.

### **A quiet revolution in the North: Change and continuity in Finnish and Swedish security policies**

- On 18 May 2022, Finland and Sweden reversed their long-standing non-alignment policies and applied for NATO membership. The trigger for the policy change was obvious: Russia's war of aggression

against Ukraine, which prompted Finland and Sweden to seek the highest possible deterrent against potential future aggression from Russia.

- Having been close partners of NATO for a long time, the two Nordic countries are already militarily well prepared for joining the Alliance. However, NATO is not only about military-level interoperability but includes a political and internal diplomatic dimension that might prove much harder to navigate for Finland and Sweden. For Finland, NATO membership marks a shift from a focus on its own territorial defence and the “spirit of the Winter War” to collective defence, while for Sweden, the narrative of 200 years of neutrality and non-alignment has been a major cornerstone of its foreign policy identity.
- Currently, all NATO countries except Hungary and Turkey have ratified Finland and Sweden’s membership. Turkey has signalled that its opposition is mainly to Sweden’s membership and less so to Finland. But separating the applications would be unwise as it would undermine the little leverage the countries have in the process vis-à-vis Turkey. Sweden remaining in the waiting room for a longer period of time would also create a strategic vulnerability and difficulties for NATO’s defence planning in the BSR.

### **Kaliningrad Oblast at war**

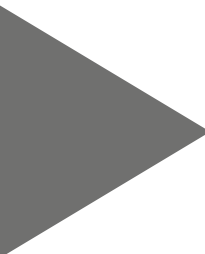
- There are three significant elements that should be discussed when reflecting on Kaliningrad Oblast’s condition and role during Russia’s war against Ukraine. First, by virtue of its location and economic structure,

the Kaliningrad enclave is the region of the Russian Federation that is most severely affected by Russia's decision to invade Ukraine and the consequences that this decision entailed, i.e., the sanctions and transport restrictions imposed by the West (including a ban on flights over EU territory, restrictions on border crossings for Russian citizens who have tourist Schengen visas, etc.). In the long run, this will lead to social, economic, and demographic degradation of the region.

- Secondly, the Kaliningrad enclave, as a region of the Russian Federation, is involved at various levels in the war against Ukraine. In the first phase of the aggression that began in February 2022, this entailed primarily the participation of soldiers from units stationed in the Kaliningrad region. Since September, it has also included the participation of those mobilized in the region. Participation of professional and mobilized soldiers coming from the Kaliningrad region in armed actions in Ukraine has not only a moral dimension but directly contributes to the deepening of negative demographic trends in the region. In addition to the participation of soldiers from the Kaliningrad region on the battlefield in Ukraine, the regional government, regional administration, and subordinate structures have been involved in the occupation of Kherson and parts of the Kherson region. High-ranking officials from Kaliningrad have been given positions in the occupation military-civilian administration of Kherson, and regional governor Anton Alikhanov has officially announced that the Kaliningrad region has taken “headship” over part of the Kherson region.

- Third, for the countries of the BSR with ongoing changes in the security structure due to the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, the Kaliningrad region has and will continue to serve as a source of tension and potential crises. Most vulnerable to such hostile actions is Lithuania, through whose territory people and goods transit between the Kaliningrad region and Belarus and further to the rest of Russia. We could already witness such a crisis in June 2022, when Russia prompted a scandal regarding the transit of sanctioned goods to and from Kaliningrad.





Damian Szacawa, Kazimierz Musiał

## **The Baltic Sea Region after Russia's invasion of Ukraine: Introduction**

At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) was mostly perceived as stable and well-developed. It was an area of intense political and economic interactions between neighbouring states, which counteracted numerous challenges through practical, co-operative behaviour and by means of multilateral regional cooperation structures. Thanks to the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) institutionalized in 2009, it was on a promising path to becoming a model macroregion where experimental governance between the EU and Russia could be tried out. But a few years later, and especially after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, regional cooperation in the BSR became more difficult. Most of the states in the region declined 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 ses-



sions of the main regional intergovernmental organization – the CBSS were cancelled, so a multilateral regional political dialogue at the highest level became impossible – the states of the region had not approved of Russia's violation of international law and expected a return to the *quo ante* situation in Ukraine before the normalization of relations with Russia in the BSR.

On the threshold of the third decade of the 21st century, numerous processes were taking place within the region, affecting its position and role in contemporary international relations. Elements of continuity and change can be witnessed both with regard to old challenges, such as protecting the marine environment and strengthening civil protection, and to new challenges of ensuring sustainable development in the region and mitigating and adapting to climate change. However, the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 marked a new era in the BSR. It triggered an increasing perception of insecurity among many of the region builders and regional stakeholders, which lead to an inevitable change in regional identification patterns in the BSR states. The most spectacular representation of this change was the radical shift in the strategic orientation of Finland which recently abandoned its traditional policy of military nonalignment and, together with Sweden, submitted an application for NATO membership. The war in Ukraine also made other states in the region change their attitudes and strategies regarding Russia. For countries like Finland, the Baltic States, and Poland, collective memories of the loss of land, lives, and livelihood at the hands of Soviet aggression in the Second World War are strengthening the process of "othering" Russia in their

current identity discourses. For other states, like Germany, it means a radical and painful confrontation with the deeply habitualized principle of “Russia first” that characterized Russia’s attitudes towards Eastern and Baltic neighbours in the past decades.

Given this context, in recent months, growing attention has been paid to the consequences of the present critical juncture affecting the region, its institutions, and the security situation of the BSR states. With this publication, the Institute of Central Europe (Instytut Europy Środkowej, IEŚ) in Lublin contributes to a broader expert discussion aimed at a better understanding of the nature of ongoing changes and their implications for regional cooperation and the security policies of states surrounding the Baltic Sea. This Policy Paper, written by experts from different countries around the Baltic Sea, also offers an assessment of the ongoing identity narratives which could lead to changing ideologies and regional imaginaries, and which may potentially create new ontological foundations for the BSR.

In their article, Kazimierz Musiał and Damian Szacawa analyse how changing identity narratives that accompany the large-scale policy change impact Baltic Sea regionalism and national security policies. They argue that punctuated equilibrium theory can be used in the aftermath of this critical juncture to explain how states and regional organizations may possibly bring about the next stable period, despite the return of geopolitics and hard security narratives to the BSR.

In his contribution, Tobias Etzold emphasizes that a new impetus for regional cooperation is required now that regional actors have suspended the membership of Russia or halted all activities and meetings with Russian partners.

While states in the BSR should take the new reality into account and adapt to the changing environment, organizations like the CBSS could help them in this as well as in solving regional challenges. In some areas, like education, science, culture, and youth exchange, cooperation without Russia will be even easier, while in others, like environmental pollution, energy supply, civil security, and organized crime, functional cooperation and achieving results should continue to be possible. In the end, he argues that a meeting between heads of government of all littoral countries (the Baltic Sea Summit) will be a signal of political will and commitment to future regional cooperation.

In the third part, Minna Ålander outlines a quiet but significant revolution in Northern Europe which has occurred since February 2022. Like other states in Europe, two states in the BSR, Finland and Sweden, have faced a significant geopolitical shift, but in their case, the Russian invasion of Ukraine appeared to trigger them to abandon long-standing nonalignment security policies. Contrary to appearances, however, their application for NATO membership was not a spontaneous decision but was preceded by a long period of close partnership and building interoperability. Despite their different geopolitical circumstances and historical experiences, they show once again how important coordination in crucial foreign and security policy decisions is for the stability of the region and for the sake of their future.

Finally, Paulina Siegień outlines that there are three significant elements that should be discussed when reflecting on Kaliningrad Oblast's condition and role during Russia's war against Ukraine. Firstly, the socioeconomic consequences of the sanctions and transport restrictions imposed by

the West. Secondly, she presents various levels of the Kaliningrad Oblast's involvement in the Russian war against Ukraine, emphasizing that this will lead to the deepening of negative demographic trends in the region. And lastly, she argues that the Kaliningrad region will continue to serve as a source of tension and potential crises in the BSR.

This short study only signals and draws readers' attention to certain issues related to the first policy responses by the BSR states and regional organizations to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ideologies, social imaginaries, and ontologies, which are related to regional identity, have far-reaching consequences for future policy decisions in the region, but it takes longer to observe the changes taking place. In the context of fundamental transformations in the international security architecture, especially affecting Ukraine but also, to a large extent, all states in the BSR, we hope that this IEŚ Policy Papers will be well received by readers as a contribution to the burgeoning discussion and will encourage experts who study these issues to continue their research.

Damian Szacawa, Kazimierz Musiał  
Lublin and Gdańsk, November 2022





Kazimierz Musiał, Damian Szacawa

## **Changing the regional identity of the Baltic Sea Region**

*Change and flows occur continuously, even and especially when a social order is presumed to be stable. However, social order evolution is infrequent<sup>1</sup>.*

For all BSR states, the critical juncture caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 created momentary chaos in their representations and expectations regarding the social reality. The developments in Ukraine exacerbated a cognitive dissonance between the official narratives of cooperation and coping with Russia in the BSR and the harsh perception of being threatened by the Russian state as a potential enemy in the region. Accordingly, this paper aims to investigate and describe the unfolding changes in Baltic Sea regionalism and accompanying identity narratives. First,

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<sup>1</sup> E. Adler, *World Ordering: A Social Theory of Cognitive Evolution*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019, p. 3.

we sketch the emblematic representations of discursive uneasiness that characterize the developments. Second, we offer a theoretical framework that enables a better understanding of identity shifts in the Baltic Sea regional regime. Third, we look at a possible methodological framework to account for the changing ideologies, imaginaries and ontologies that constitute regional identity. Fourth, we look at the case studies that enable us to probe into the identity discourses and describe possible identity change from the perspective of participant observants. Fifth, we conclude the paper by highlighting issues and questions that may have a decisive influence on the emergence of new ontological foundations for the BSR.

### **Chaos and cognitive dissonance of the punctuated equilibrium**

Since 1989/1991, the BSR – the five Nordic countries and the three Baltic states, including adjoining parts of Germany, Poland and Russia – has evolved into a laboratory for a non-geopolitical form of regionalism, conceived to defuse Cold War tensions. Geared towards “low” politics and “soft” security across a multitude of policy fields, this new regionalism aimed to move “high” politics and “hard” geopolitics out of the BSR. The relative success of post-Cold War cooperation has established the region and its regional regime as a role model for EU regional cooperation elsewhere<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> C. 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, pp. 395-411.

Post-Cold War BSR cooperation has been characterized by soft governance and bottom-up initiatives aimed at desecuritizing the region<sup>3</sup>. A vast infrastructure for regional cooperation has emerged in the process, consisting of many transnational institutions, civil society organizations, consultative authorities, expert networks, policy think-tanks and political fora<sup>4</sup>. BSR regionalism has aimed to strengthen regional identity through public participation and civil society networking – in effect, “talking the region into existence”<sup>5</sup>, largely following the so-called new regionalism approach<sup>6</sup>.

The end of the Cold War thus presented a unique window of opportunity for regional cooperation around the Baltic Sea. Today, however, the BSR is facing the return of geopolitics. Growing uncertainty following the invasion of Ukraine has made Russia a less predictable partner. Since 2014, the success story of post-Cold War BSR cooperation had been increasingly troubled, and in February 2022, it was shattered by the prospect of future contests regarding

<sup>3</sup> B. Buzan, O. Wæver and J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder 1998; C. Gebhard, *Unravelling the Baltic Sea Conundrum: Regionalism and European Integration Revisited*, Nomos, Baden-Baden 2009; F. Tassinari and L.-K. Williams, *Soft Security in the Baltic Sea Region: Environmental Cooperation as a Pilot Project for Regional Integration in the Baltic Sea Area*, [in:] F. Tassinari (ed.), *The Baltic Sea Region in the European Union: Reflections on Identity, Soft Security and Marginality*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, Gdańsk–Berlin 2003, pp. 27–57.

<sup>4</sup> P. Joenniemi (ed.), *Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region*, Taylor & Francis, Washington 1993; D. J. Galbreath and C. Gebhard (eds.), *Cooperation or Conflict? Problematising Organizational Overlap in Europe*, Ashgate, Farnham 2010.

<sup>5</sup> P. Jukarainen, *Norden is Dead – Long Live the Eastwards Faced Euro-North: Geopolitical Re-making of Norden in a Nordic Journal*, “Cooperation and Conflict” 1999, vol. 34, no. 4, p. 359; T. Suominen, E. Antola and H. Haukkala, *Networks in the Baltic Sea Region*, Turku 2000.

<sup>6</sup> B. Hettne, *Beyond the ‘New’ Regionalism*, “New Political Economy” 2005, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 543–571; F. Söderbaum and T. M. Shaw (eds.), *Theories of New Regionalism*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2003.



key security dilemmas, such as energy, environmental, migration, human rights and transport safety, in addition to growing military activity and hybrid warfare. The events following Russia's military invasion caused discursive chaos and cognitive dissonance in all institutional arrangements and organizations where Russia was a partner or participated on a multilateral basis.

### **Theories that foreshadow identity shifts in the regional regime**

Describing changes of identity would normally require a long-term study, the conducting of many surveys and observing changing values of social actors. With regard to the BSR, there have been attempts to study nations or even groups of nations bordering the sea, so that the potentiality of the regional identity could be ascertained<sup>7</sup>. Suffice to say that in different temporal frameworks of BSR development, different ideologies fuelled the narratives constructing the region as an imagined community<sup>8</sup>. They contributed to the creation and amalgamation of distinctive imaginaries and ontologies assuming a structural propensity for regional identity, even though it was still in the making and difficult to establish<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> K. Duvold, S. Berglund and J. Ekman, *Political Culture in the Baltic States: Between National and European Integration*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2020; B. Henningsen, T. Etzold and K. Hanne (eds.), *The Baltic Sea Region: A Comprehensive Guide*, Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, Berlin 2017.

<sup>8</sup> K. Musiał and Z. Šime, *How to build the 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.

<sup>9</sup> G. Burbulytė-Tsiskarishvili, *The Quest for Regional Identity in the Baltic Region*, [in:] S. Vaitėkūnas, L. Šimanskien, R. Provaznikova (eds.), *Modelling the European future: integrating the old and new*, Klaipėda University, Klaipėda 2008, pp. 43-49.

A common denominator for studying identity is usually sought in relating it to individual, cultural, social, ethnic or regional representations. As such, regional identity can be comprehended as a special case of collective social and cultural identity, often based on the regional (local) tradition and relating to a delimited territory or space defined by certain distinctive features. These can include topographical, social, cultural, symbolic, economic and other issues making it possible to distinguish it from other regions. When we realize that most of these features are not inherent but are socially constructed, imposed externally or evolving internally within a given community, we must recognize that each identity is a human construct, with natural and cultural properties which are permanently changing. As such, identity is not something fixed and given once and for all – each identity is always in the process of construction or reconstruction by a human social actor or a group of people who constantly interpret it, using representations coded in language and symbols to support it. Maintaining identity means not only protecting it against external threats and competing with other identities, but also restoration and adaptation to changing conditions<sup>10</sup>.

A way to ascertain what kind of change we are dealing with is to study the current situation through the prism of the critical juncture and punctuated equilibrium theories. Critical juncture theory makes us pay attention to the socio-political development as prompted by moments of instability, uncertainty and profound fluidity where important

<sup>10</sup> A. Mutanen, *Regional Identity under Transformation: About The Notion of Identity*, "Limes" 2010, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 28-38.

events create the need for institutional responses. Critical junctures are at the origin of important changes, mainly institutional but also capability-driven. A critical juncture causes a non-incremental change of the institutional status quo, leading to an abrupt change in policies.

Punctuated equilibrium theory provides theoretical explanations for institutional stability and change over time. Institutions change when an exogenous event disrupts or punctuates the equilibrium.

### **Conceptualizing methodological order by addressing changes in ideologies, imaginaries and ontologies**

Identities are constructed on the building blocks of political myths that are maintained and transformed through identity narratives. They provide a context of meaning within which an actor's positionality, the action site or a dramatic situation and the action itself are knitted together within a coherent story. These may be related to multi-variant and open-ended imaginaries, more related to the imagination than to reality, thanks to which one of the key features of collective identities, such as national or regional identities, is that they are not mutually exclusive. Ken Booth sees even the opposite tendency – collective identities are becoming more complex and overlapping each other, which means that a group of people can be part of different political identities at the same time<sup>11</sup>. When translating the above assertion to the situation in the BSR, the residents of the region identify themselves with their nation-state and their local

<sup>11</sup> K. Booth, *Security and Emancipation*, "Review of International Studies" 1991, vol. 17, no. 4, p. 315.

community, and at the same time, they are developing a regional identity. These multiple identifications among which regional identification evolves and is maintained are transformed mainly through discourse practices such as narratives, conversations, and speech acts which shape reality and impact changes in ideologies, imaginaries, and ontologies.

While the above-mentioned practices are deployed by internal and external actors in the process of building collective identity, they do not function in a political or social vacuum. Peter Wennersten distinguishes two categories of discursive practices (inside-inside articulations and inside-outside articulations), depending on whether they emphasize the Self dimension or focus on the existence of an Other. Inside-inside articulations are characterized by a discourse which emphasizes similarities and commonalities and silences differences. They stress the Self dimension, and work to consolidate belonging to the Self group. The second category – inside-outside articulations – are based on a differentiation discourse, which establishes limitations between the Self and an Other. The boundary between the Self and an Other arises as a result of the coexistence of both types of discourse, but only in the second case is the boundary categorically defined within the discourse. Considered together, these articulations constitute the process of inclusion/exclusion of a given subject into/from a particular Self/Other group<sup>12</sup>.

What the discursive reconfiguration of Self and the Other as a result of war in Ukraine may mean for the BSR in

<sup>12</sup> P. Wennersten, *The Politics of Inclusion: The Case of the Baltic States*, "Cooperation and Conflict" 1999, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 276-286.

the longer term is too early to say. What is available are the salient and observable changes of the Self and the Other in current ideologies (understood as patterned clusters of normatively imbued ideas and concepts, including distinct representations of power relations) and in quickly changing imaginaries (i.e. deeply seated understandings of the social world)<sup>13</sup>. Particularly relevant in this regard are the discursive clashes between the ideology and imaginaries produced by the Russian World narratives as conceptualized by Alexander Dugin that are fuelling identity discourses in Russia, and the down-to-earth and functional imaginary of the Baltic World as a model region represented in the EUSBSR's documents.

The underlying categories of ideologies and imaginaries that narratively exploit the conceptualization of the inside-inside/outside as well as hostile and friendly narratives can be used to analyse how the 2022 critical juncture is affecting the activity of the main regional intergovernmental organization – the CBSS – and the practice of the national foreign and security policies of Germany, Finland, and Sweden.

### Case study

The CBSS was an important platform for regional cooperation before and after the EU enlargements in 1995 and 2004. The inclusion of Russia as an equal member meant that this state was involved in the Self and was often per-

<sup>13</sup> For a more sophisticated elaboration of the relationship between ideologies, imaginaries and ontologies, see M. B. Steger and P. James, *Levels of Subjective Globalization: Ideologies, Imaginaries, Ontologies*, "Perspectives on Global Development and Technology" 2013, vol. 12, pp. 17-40.

ceived as one of the important added values the CBSS could offer to its member states. Thanks to internal reforms and resilience, and despite unfavourable external conditions after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the CBSS was still an important place for regional political dialogue based on a more flexible and pragmatic formula, taking into account the then state of relations in the BSR. The CBSS has become the only regional political body where Russia and EU/EEA member states cooperate against geopolitical changes. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 created another critical juncture, and specifically new conditions and pressures, for the institutional evolution of the general-purpose organization<sup>14</sup>.

However, even if after 2014 there was, for instance, sufficient political will among BSR states to maintain contact with Russia at a low political level, it is hard to imagine such will in the current state of affairs. The change now is more of a puncture of the definitive unstable balance that was regained in the BSR after 2014. On 3 March 2022, after swift consultations between the foreign ministries of the ten member states of the CBSS and the High Representative of the EU 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 then chaired the organization. The docu-

<sup>14</sup> S. Gänzle, K. Kern and N. Tynkkynen, *Governing the Baltic Sea Region at critical junctures (1991–2021): How do transnational and intergovernmental organizations cope with external regional change?*, "Journal of Baltic Studies" 2022, DOI: 10.1080/01629778.2022.2140356, pp. 17–18.

ment stressed that Russia, following its armed aggression, must not benefit from any cooperation within the CBSS<sup>15</sup>.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine stands in clear contradiction to international political norms, including 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. These political declarations created so-called soft law, which is perceived as a set of informal rules determining the standards of expected behaviour in the international environment.

Russia's Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova called the decision to exclude Russia from the CBSS a "hostile act" and threatened to withdraw Russia from the organization, but this did not change the position of the CBSS members. Anniken Huitfeldt, Norway's foreign minister, stressed that the suspension would remain in force until cooperation became possible again under international law<sup>16</sup>. The ostracism resulting from the organizational sanctions introduced would result in the long-term freezing of political contacts, which would be difficult to rebuild at the regional as well as local levels, especially after a separated Russia decided to leave the CBSS, as announced by Sergey Lavrov, minister of foreign affairs of the Russian Federation,

<sup>15</sup> Council of the Baltic Sea States, *Declaration*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/8818049096154946aedc4b2508cd43fo/220303-final-draft-declaration-cbss-minus-russia.pdf> [03.11.2022].

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway, *Russia suspended from Council of the Baltic Sea States*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/russland-suspended-fra-ostersjoradet/id2903009/> [03.11.2022].

on 17 May 2022<sup>17</sup>. Even though it's true that the participation of Russia in regional cooperation is important to solve several transnational challenges, the country's withdrawal from the organization does not mean that the CBSS should be dissolved. And all other member states as well as the EU already confirmed this in May 2022 in Kristiansand, where the first CBSS Ministerial Session in nine years was held. All the CBSS's long-term priorities (building regional identity, supporting a sustainable and prosperous region, and developing a safe and secure region) remain valid. Moreover, the long-term challenges in the region identified by young people and parliamentarians (such as climate change, demographic problems, and biodiversity loss) have not been solved. In this situation, preserving/modifying the existing institutional framework, which already has a long tradition and institutional memory that helped to facilitate overcoming existing challenges, would be even more important. So far, the CBSS has been effective in responding to and adapting to changes in its environment by modifying its plans of action, accompanied by the institutionalisation of cooperation<sup>18</sup>.

These decisions and the continuation of an unjustified attack by Russia which openly challenges the rules-based international order (of which the security architecture in the BSR is a part) will lead to further rapid changes in the regional system. All states in the BSR reacted clearly and

<sup>17</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Ministry Statement on the withdrawal of the Russian Federation from the Council of the Baltic Sea States*, 17 May 2022, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1813674/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1813674/) [03.11.2022].

<sup>18</sup> D. Szacawa, *Evolution of the Council of the Baltic Sea States: three decades of regional co-operation in the Baltic Sea Region (1991–2021)*, Instytut Europy Środkowej, Lublin 2021.



immediately, at least at a diplomatic level, by suspending cooperation with the aggressor and maintaining and even accelerating the changes in national defence policies across the BSR visible after the 2014 annexation of Crimea<sup>19</sup>. This led to an increase in the importance of defence issues in the national politics of the BSR states. Changing public opinion and attention, as well as defence policy formulation and wider processes related to security strategies, have been in the spotlight, replacing the questions of the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change or other threats, challenges and risks.

The most spectacular change occurred in the security policies of Finland and Sweden, which decided to end the period of nonalignment policy in the case of Finland and the nearly 200-year period of neutrality policy in the case of Sweden. Russian demands on the US and NATO countries, undermining the architecture of European security, have sparked a lively debate among politicians, experts, and the public in Sweden and Finland. The proposals for extended security guarantees demanded by Russia were so far-reaching that their acceptance would change the entire international order and the principles of the coexistence of states in force since the end of the Cold War. Representatives of both Finland and Sweden stood firm in their position that they should have the option of joining NATO in the event of further worrying changes in the international environment<sup>20</sup>. Their accession, based on applications and the NATO Madrid Summit decision to invite both states to become members

<sup>19</sup> A. M. Friede, *In defence of the Baltic Sea region: (non-)allied policy responses to the exogenous shock of the Ukraine crisis*, "European Security" 2022, vol. 31, no. 4, pp. 517-539.

<sup>20</sup> W. Alaberque and B. Schreer, *Finland, Sweden and NATO Membership*, "Survival" 2022, vol. 64, no. 3, pp. 67-72.

of the Alliance, would constitute a major shift in regional (“NATO-ization” of the BSR), as well as European, security. Apart from a symbolic change in the regional security architecture, the enlargement of NATO to include Sweden and Finland will also have practical significance. On a political level, the security policies of both countries will in many places be in line with those of Poland and the Baltic States, especially in terms of an identical perception of the threats coming from Russia and the strengthening of NATO’s eastern flank. At the strategic level, it will ensure better control over the sea routes in the Baltic Sea and strengthen the ability to assist the Baltic States in the event of possible aggression on their territory (by land, sea and air). And at the operational level, the ability of both countries to defend their territory and contribute to the development of NATO’s collective forces will strengthen the regional capacity of the North Atlantic Alliance<sup>21</sup>.

Gradual and slow changes are also evident in Germany, where “Zeitenwende” (a historic shift in German foreign and security policy) is still grappling with the demons of the past as well as economic and energy considerations. Following the announcement of this radical change at the end of February 2022 by Chancellor Olaf Scholz, meaning i.a. significant funding (€100 billion) for the modernization of the German armed forces (to surpass the 2% of GDP threshold that Germany’s NATO allies had been demanding for years) and

<sup>21</sup> A. Kuczyńska-Zonik and D. Szacawa, *Szczyt NATO w Madrycie: „natoizacja” regionu Morza Bałtyckiego*, “Komentarze IEŚ” 2022, no. 649, 5 July 2022, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/szczyt-nato-w-madrycie-natoizacja-regionu-morza-baltyckiego/> [03.11.2022].

military support for Ukraine<sup>22</sup>. However significant these decisions are for European security, the “Zeitenwende” takes on even greater significance for the departure from the key tenets of 50 years of Ostpolitik. Widely accepted by the main German political forces, these tenets have been brutally destroyed. This applies both to the triumph of liberal democracy among European states, the exclusion of war in Europe, the inclusive nature of European security involving (rather than directed against) Russia, and the belief that the best way to influence Russia is through political and economic engagement (“change through trade”)<sup>23</sup>. However, even if Germany under the leadership of Chancellor Scholtz declared “Zeitenwende” – a 180-degree shift in foreign and defence policy as an unequivocal response to a new reality created by Russia, it is the pace of this process and the possibility to make similar mistakes on other foreign policy directions that are the real challenges<sup>24</sup>. Moreover, given the recent development in relations with China (on 26 October 2022, the Chinese company Cosco received approval from the German government to purchase a nearly 25% stake in one of the terminals located in the port of Hamburg), it should be emphasized that these actions risk repeating many of the mistakes in Berlin’s China policy. Failure to learn the right conclusions from the failure of Germany’s traditional policy

<sup>22</sup> T. Bunde, *Lessons (to be) learned? Germany’s Zeitenwende and European security after the Russian invasion of Ukraine*, “Contemporary Security Policy” 2022, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 516–530.

<sup>23</sup> A. Stent, *Germany and Russia: Farewell to Ostpolitik?*, “Survival” 2022, vol. 64, no. 5, pp. 27–38.

<sup>24</sup> R. Rizzo, J. Fleck, *Germany can’t afford to fumble the ‘Zeitenwende’*, “New Atlanticist”, 3 November 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/germany-cant-afford-to-fumble-the-zeitenwende/> [04.11.2022].

toward Russia and a fixation on the importance of economic relations could lead to similar deficiencies, underestimating the risks of the chosen course of development and ignoring the risks of economic interdependence.

## **Concluding remarks**

The Baltic Sea area as a geographical unit has a rich history. Since the 1990s, it has managed to develop into a region that frames and institutionalizes various identity narratives based on friendliness and cooperation rather than enmity or hostility. The critical juncture caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine punctuated the narrative equilibrium and brought about changes both inside the region and in its environs. Despite the continually uniting character of the CBSS rhetoric underlining collaboration and trust, we witness a different regional audience that is reading these signals in a different way than before the invasion.

Since February 2022, Russian violation of international law in Ukraine and the continual deployment of increasingly more hostile narratives also towards other countries bordering the Baltic Sea have caused irreparable damage to the BSR identity narratives including Russia. There is a great probability that while the ambition to build collaboration and trust remains at the very foundation of identity politics in the region, the hostile narratives will lead to both institutional and ideational “othering” of Russia as not belonging to the BSR community. For all actors in the BSR, it is now apparent that the ideology of the Russian World that feeds imaginaries of national greatness at the cost of its neighbours is absolutely at odds with the ideas, values and statements underlying the contemporary social imaginary of the

Baltic World. The longer the war lasts and the more damage is done to the previously established institutional and ideational setting for an inclusive BSR, the more likely a lasting change is in the ontology of Baltic Sea regionalism. What has been built within the framework of new regionalism and underpinned by friendly narratives including Russian partners and Russia as a state is now being questioned and a new way of being-in-the-(Baltic) space world is emerging.



Tobias Etzold

**New impetus for regional  
cooperation required:  
The implications of Russia's war  
in Ukraine for the Baltic  
Sea Region**

Russia's brutal attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 can be seen as a watershed for geopolitics, and for the security architecture and regional cooperation in the BSR and wider Northern Europe including the Arctic regions. In its 30-year history since the end of the Cold War, modern regional cooperation has experienced several up and downs and faced various challenges, but this time the situation is different and more severe. While reacting relatively mildly to Russia after the Crimea annexation in 2014 and showing an overall understanding of Russian-specific needs and sensitivities, regional stakeholders have now suspended the membership of Russia/Russian partners, and even Belarus, or temporarily halted all their activities and meetings. These measures are necessary, consistent and unavoidable, but in turn have direct consequences for regional coopera-

tion in the BSR and wider Northern Europe implying a need to adapt and reorient.

### **The history of Baltic Sea regional cooperation**

Regional cooperation in the BSR is still a relatively young phenomenon. During the Cold War East-West divide, regional cooperation involving all countries of these respective regions was either impossible or only possible within narrow limitations. The fundamental geopolitical changes at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s created a wider space and fresh momentum for political and economic transformation and growth as well as international and regional cooperation. The BSR developed from a divided region into one of the world's most economically successful and fastest growing. In recognition of the new opportunities and challenges, a dense network of new regional institutions was established in order to enhance inter- and trans-national dialogue and cooperation in the early 1990s and beyond consisting in most cases of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the EU or stakeholders from these countries: the intergovernmental CBSS, the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), the Baltic Sea Region Energy Cooperation (BASREC), Baltic 21 for promoting sustainability, the Baltic Sea States Subregional Co-operation (BSSSC), the Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC) and many more specific organizations, platforms and initiatives.

The EU's Eastern enlargement of 2004, including the three littoral Baltic states and Poland, altered the circumstances and preconditions for regional cooperation and its institutions in the BSR considerably. Since most of the coun-

tries of the region had joined the EU, it remained unclear to what extent the services of the impressive number of regional organizations would still be required. After enlargement, the EU became a more active and influential player in the region, which partly explains the vanishing impact of some regional institutions. Most of the member states remained interested in regional cooperation but preferred placing it into a larger European context with the EU as the predominant framework for this. The inauguration of the EUSBSR in 2009 is an expression of this stronger EU role. Still, all relevant regional institutions remained with one of their main objectives being to secure Russian participation and involvement in regional development, avoiding its isolation and tackling joint regional challenges, for example environmental issues<sup>1</sup>.

## **New challenges for the BSR**

In the aftermath of Russia's annexation of the Crimea peninsula and the beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine in early 2014, regional cooperation with Russia was reduced to functional and technical aspects in many policy areas. On several occasions, high-level political meetings were cancelled. Only in the past five years or so have Russia and the other states reconverged politically at the regional level, and meetings of foreign ministers have taken place again since 2017 at least in informal settings within the CBSS, although nothing has changed in Russia's basic attitude in principle.

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of regional cooperation structures in the BSR, see T. Etzold, *Structures and Modes of Regional Cooperation*, [in:] B. Henningsen, T. Etzold and K. Hanne (eds.), op. cit., pp. 169-203.



Now, regional cooperation has been hit by the temporary exclusion of Russia at a sensitive point, mainly because of its strong focus on creating and maintaining structures to engage Russia and Russian stakeholders as equal partners after EU enlargement. The CBSS, for example, has derived a large part of its legitimacy for its continued existence from this goal. However, in hindsight, the focus of the Council's work on Russia's involvement as well as the strong consideration of the specific Russian interest, needs and sensitivities might have been too strong. This is shown by the fact that even after 2014, the importance of Russia's involvement in regional cooperation structures in order to address common regional challenges, and also as a symbolic value, seemed to outweigh a permanent condemnation of Russia's breach of international law. On this basis, attempts were made to reform and politically strengthen organizations such as the CBSS, perceiving them still as important regional bridges between the east and west in Northern Europe. But the recent events put a sudden stop to such efforts.

The remaining member states of the CBSS saw no opportunity to continue cooperation with Russia and no other alternative than suspending the country. They even declared that under these circumstances, Russia should no longer be able to enjoy the benefits of its participation in the council<sup>2</sup>. Initially, it was intended that the Russia's exclusion would remain in force until it was possible to resume cooperation on the basis of respect for the fundamental principles of

<sup>2</sup> Council of the Baltic Sea States, *Declaration*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/8818049096154946aedc4b2508cd43fo/220303-final-draft-declaration-cbss-minus-russia.pdf> [04.11.2022].

international law. But in May this year, the Russian government withdraw from the CBSS. The Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission or “Helsinki Commission” (HELCOM) suspended all official meetings of its bodies and meetings of project groups with Russian participation until further notice. The BSPC excluded Russian parliamentarians from all its activities and continued its work without them. In June, the annual BSPC gathering took place in Stockholm. The transnational UBC, which brings together 69 cities from across the BSR, suspended the two Russian members St Petersburg and Gatchina. The BSSSC suspended the Kaliningrad Oblast, which had been one of the more active players in the network. Russian and Belorussian actors were excluded from the new Interreg Baltic Sea programme and the EU’s Northern Dimension, as were Russian stakeholders from projects within the EUSBSR.

Thus, on all levels of BSR cooperation, the involvement of Russia or Russian stakeholders has been suspended for the foreseeable future. All regional bodies and their stakeholders need to take the new reality into account and accordingly adapt to the altered circumstances. Still, the (temporary) exclusion of Russian stakeholders does not have to mean the end of regional cooperation across the Baltic Sea area but even offers chances for a new type of regional cooperation amongst the willing, with opportunities for deepening and widening cooperation, for example by involving Ukraine as an adjacent country more closely.

## **Reorientation of Baltic Sea cooperation**

The CBSS foreign ministers recognized these new opportunities at their first official meeting after nine years, which

had become possible after Russia's suspension, in Kristiansand (Norway) in May 2022 by reaffirming the value of the cooperation and the validity of the Vilnius Declaration of June 2021. They further emphasized the values which have made the BSR countries globally attractive with open societies where citizens enjoy freedom, democracy, prosperity and the rule of law (respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms)<sup>3</sup>. Observers agree that all three long-term priorities of the CBSS (regional identity, a safe and secure region, a sustainable and prosperous region) remain valid and that on this basis the organization should not be dissolved. Maintaining the regional structures would also enable Russia's future reintegration into the regional community in the case this ever becomes possible again<sup>4</sup>.

Baltic Sea stakeholders are at first faced with the task of thoroughly analysing in which areas and in which formats further cooperation is possible and meaningful even without Russia, where concrete results could be achieved, and what the general added value of regional cooperation can be. This process is still ongoing in the CBSS and other regional formats. Overall, there still looms a need for regional cooperation and solutions: a report for the CBSS<sup>5</sup> identified not only a great need for improvement and development of the cooperative efforts but also to achieve more tangible results

<sup>3</sup> Council of the Baltic Sea States, *Declaration 19th CBSS Ministerial Session, Kristiansand, Norway*, 25 May 2022, <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/the-declaration-of-the-19th-ministerial-session-1.pdf> [04.11.2022].

<sup>4</sup> D. Szacawa, *A decisive year for regional cooperation within the Council of the Baltic Sea States*, "IES Commentaries" 2022, no. 616, 31 May 2022, <https://ies.lublin.pl/en/comments/a-decisive-year-for-regional-cooperation-within-the-council-of-the-baltic-sea-states/> [04.11.2022].

<sup>5</sup> Z. Ozolina and T. Etzold, *Reflection Paper on The Vilnius Declaration – A Vision for the Baltic Sea Region by 2020*, July 2020, reflection-paper.pdf (cbss.org) [04.11.2022].

in numerous areas such as environmental and marine protection, maritime economy, civil security and digitalization. It also describes the remaining significant differences, especially in terms of socio-economic standards, between the states in the east of the Baltic Sea, i.e. not only Russia, and those in the west. Organizations such as the CBSS, BSSSC, HELCOM and UBC are therefore still needed to contribute to narrowing these differences between the Nordic countries and Germany on the one hand and the Baltic states and Poland on the other through exchange and learning from each other.

Thus, in general and at least in theory, a distinction could be made between two types of cooperation areas. On the one hand, there are those in which Russia contributes to the challenges, such as environmental and marine pollution, climate pollution, energy supply and security, civil security and organized crime, and in which it is therefore also needed to help tackle these problems. On the other hand, there are those fields in which cooperation is primarily concerned with an exchange, learning from each other, and the creation of joint structures and synergies. In areas such as education, science, culture, digitalization, youth exchange and the labour market, it should be easier to continue cooperation without Russia and without a serious loss of substance, and the remaining stakeholders could still benefit from their cooperation.

Indeed, in the current situation, cooperation on soft policy issues works well, for example within the CBSS framework. The youth dialogue and the involvement of young stakeholders in ongoing activities are becoming cross-cutting issues, with various regional bodies at various levels

fostering their efforts and putting the necessary structures into place. Also, progress is being made on the concept of cultural cities. But even in the first group of aforementioned areas, functional cooperation and achieving results should continue to be possible among those willing to cooperate. Russia's involvement and contribution to finding solutions was in many cases limited anyway. It already seems that cooperation in several policy areas works more smoothly without Russia, for example in the areas of civil protection, children's rights and the fight against human trafficking. It will, however, take some time to establish whether cooperation in the new formats works and renders any results. Stakeholders also need to be convinced of the added value of continuing to work together.

More difficult seems to be the situation in HELCOM as a treaty-based (Helsinki Convention) organization into whose structures Russia was legally more bound. Most of HELCOM's activities are therefore still on hold and it seems to be paralysed, raising the question of whether it will be able to continue or whether it will need to be replaced by another structure, for example by the CBSS or the EUSBSR. Putting on hold the important and urgent work of protecting the maritime environment for a longer period of time should not be an option. At least the CBSS has already taken over some of HELCOM's tasks by declaring the clearing of dumped munitions in the Baltic Sea to be one of its priorities under the current German presidency.

Energy is another important area of cooperation in which more needs to be done in the near future. Another German priority is indeed the extension of wind power plants in the BSR. Some potential is hidden in the BSR in this respect.

Extending energy generation through wind and other renewable resources would also contribute to security as this would mean less dependence on fossil energy sourced from Russia<sup>6</sup>. A Baltic Sea Energy Security Summit in Denmark in August 2022 was heading in the same direction. The fact that this was not, however, coordinated with the CBSS shows that the old challenge of connecting and coordinating in a meaningful way the various activities of different regional platforms in the same policy area remains an important issue now and in the future.

It is problematic for regional cooperation in the current situation that it is not a high (political) priority for the governments of many of the remaining members. They are currently occupied with national and international adjustments to the new security situation, coping with the influx of refugees from Ukraine, the economic consequences of the war including an energy security and price crisis and the sanctions against Russia. Furthermore, they are still dealing with the Covid pandemic and all its economic, political and social side-effects. Since for several countries BSR cooperation was mainly a tool for fostering contact and relations with Russia on a regional level, for them the value of regional cooperation has diminished. The Nordic countries are conducting new efforts to strengthen their internal cooperation, while their cooperation with the three Baltic countries in the Nordic-Baltic 8 and 6 (in the EU) has increased its relevance and value and while they extended

<sup>6</sup> Auswaertiges Amt, *Deutschland fuer ein Jahr an der Spitze des Ostseerats*, 1 July 2022, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/deutscher-vorsitz-im-ostseerat/2538796> [04.11.2022].

their bilateral relations to Germany and Poland as a group. Therefore, intergovernmental BSR cooperation could become redundant for them in the long term.

Another important but yet unanswered question concerns the EU's future role in regional cooperation and its commitment to its membership in regional bodies such as the CBSS and its own regional initiatives. In the current situation, the EUSBSR could be of particular importance in continuing a halfway functioning Baltic Sea forum for cooperation. As an internal EU project, it is one of the few regional formats in which Russia has not been fully involved, only taking part as a partner in several projects. This was considered a big mistake and discriminatory against Russia by many regional stakeholders and observers when the strategy was launched, especially since in later macro-regions such as the Danube and Alpine regions, third countries have been fully involved. But the EU members in the BSR were interested in creating an intra-EU regional structure in which they could, if necessary, go further under EU law than that what would have been possible in cooperation formats with Russian participation. In the current context, it might therefore make sense to improve the implementation and functioning of the EUSBSR and thus strengthen the European macro-regional approach and to even more closely link the EUSBSR with other regional structures. The CBSS, for example, will now have better opportunities to engage in the strategy without Russia. However, for this to happen, the overall rather low commitment to the strategy among stakeholders will have to increase considerably.

## **Ways forward in the Baltic Sea Region**

In view of the current situation, the suspension of Russian stakeholders from the regional cooperation formats in the Baltic Sea and Arctic regions was justified and without an alternative. Anything else would have meant a serious loss of prestige for these platforms. Regional cooperation without Russia will be possible and desirable, offering chances for a new type of even more effective regional cooperation with opportunities for becoming deeper and wider. The more painful task will be to finally bid farewell to the value-based notion of a regional community with a common regional identity including Russia. Regional cooperation in Northern Europe and the BSR requires not only a new definition, orientation and legitimization but also flexibility and staying power. For this to happen, it will be important to bring the political dimension back more strongly. A Baltic Sea Summit bringing the heads of government of all littoral countries together in 2023, an old format that has not taken place since 2013, might be useful as a signal of will and commitment to engage in future regional cooperation from the highest political level.







Minna Ålander

## **A quiet revolution in the North: Change and continuity in Finnish and Swedish security policies**

On 18 May 2022, Finland and Sweden reversed their long-standing nonalignment policies and applied for NATO membership. The trigger for the policy change was obvious: Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. With the full-scale invasion of a neighbour, Russia decisively crossed the red lines of its other neighbours, who responded by seeking to secure themselves against potential future aggression from Russia.

### **Building interoperability**

Finland and Sweden's decision to break with their military nonalignment seemed like a radical and sudden change. However, it did not come from out of the blue as much as it might seem at first glance. Both had been pursuing a close partnership with NATO since the 1990s by joining the Partnership for Peace in 1994 and becoming Enhanced Opportunity Partners in 2014. Finland and Sweden have been also

among the most active partners of NATO and have contributed to NATO's missions and operations, starting with the NATO-led peacekeeping force in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995 (Sweden)/1996 (Finland), Afghanistan (Sweden 2003–2014 and in a supporting role until 2021, Finland 2002–2021), both in Iraq and Kosovo and Sweden in Libya. Both have also participated in the enhanced NATO Response Force (NRF) and signed a memorandum of understanding on Host Nation Support.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a turning point for both Nordic countries. Sweden, having scaled down its armed forces significantly in a "strategic timeout"<sup>1</sup> after the Cold War, had a particularly rude awakening. Sweden started a rearmament process, including reinstating partial conscription and re-establishing the discontinued Gotland regiment on the strategically important island in the Baltic Sea. After 2014, both Finland and Sweden further intensified their cooperation with NATO partners – as well as with each other<sup>2</sup>. Starting with a joint action plan in 2014, Finland and Sweden signed a bilateral memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation in 2018. Through regular participation in NATO and NATO partner-led exercises (such as the biannual Arctic Challenge held since 2013 as a result of Nordic cooperation between Finland, Sweden, and Norway; NATO's main exercise Trident Juncture in 2018; the major multinational Cold Response exercise in

<sup>1</sup> B. Kunz, *Sweden's NATO Workaround. Swedish security and defense policy against the backdrop of Russian revisionism*, "IFRI Focus stratégique", no. 64, November 2015, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> M. Pesu, T. Iso-Markku, *The deepening Finnish-Swedish security and defence relationship: From operative cooperation to 'strategic interoperability'?*, "FIIA Briefing Paper", no. 291, October 2020.

Northern Norway in March 2022; Hedgehog in the Baltics in May; and the BALTOPS 22 naval exercise), Finland and Sweden have been actively and constantly increasing their interoperability with NATO forces. Finland and Sweden have also enhanced their bilateral defence cooperation with key NATO partners, such as the United States<sup>3</sup> and the United Kingdom. Regional cooperation formats include the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO), as well as Nordic-Baltic cooperation in the NB8 format, and the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) with the participation of the Baltic and Nordic states and the Netherlands. Hitherto, Sweden and Finland were the only non-NATO participating states in the initiatives. Their membership in NATO can thus unlock new levels of ambition and streamlines the potential of the initiatives by harmonizing the security architecture in the Nordic-Baltic region.

Militarily, Finland and Sweden are therefore already well integrated with NATO and work is currently ongoing to further increase interoperability through continuous exercises with NATO partners (Finland alone added 20 new or partially modified exercises to its 2022 calendar after submitting the NATO application) while waiting for NATO accession to be ratified by all members. However, NATO is not only about the military-level interoperability but includes a political

<sup>3</sup> Finland and Sweden signed bilateral Statements of Intent on defence cooperation with the United States in 2016 and a trilateral Statement of Intent from 2018. Sweden and Finland are currently in the process of negotiating more comprehensive and binding Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCA). Finland is also currently in the process of negotiating a more comprehensive agreement. With the UK, Finland has had a Framework Arrangement since 2016, and Sweden also signed a Programme of Defence Cooperation with the UK in 2016. Both signed declarations of mutual security assistance with the UK in May 2022, ahead of the NATO application.

and internal diplomatic dimension that might prove much harder to navigate for Finland and Sweden.

### **Finland: From the “spirit of the Winter War” to collective defence**

In Finland, the memory of the last invasion from the east in 1939–40 by the Soviet Union continued to shape security thinking and defence planning in the eight following decades. In a similar vein as with Ukraine today, Finland only received limited material help from the West at the time. Several thousand Swedish volunteers fought alongside the Finns, although Sweden formally remained neutral. Even before the Winter War, Sweden and Finland shared a long history of wars with Russia: Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden for several centuries until Sweden lost it to Russia in the Finnish War of 1808–09. Before that, Sweden and Finland, its “eastern half”, had been at war with different Russian state formations approximately at least once per century.

The experience of having been up against an overwhelming opponent alone and, nevertheless, managing to inflict great losses on the invader and to prevail against a Soviet occupation, the so-called “spirit of the Winter War”, has been a defining factor of Finnish identity and Finland’s approach to national security. On a more concrete level, it has set the parameters for Finnish defence policy, so that the Finnish Defence Forces’ capabilities are geared to countering an attack from Russia. A strategic analysis from the beginning of the 2000s, according to which Finland has made procurement decisions and planned its national defence over the past 20 years, has been confirmed in its accuracy by the type

of war Russia is waging in Ukraine, highlighting the role of artillery and air defence. On the other hand, the Winter War also taught Finland a lesson: “never again alone” – meaning the country should avoid facing the invader from the east alone again. Hence the Finnish NATO membership application now that the threat posed by Russia has materialized in Ukraine.

For Finland, military nonalignment was a pragmatic rather than ideological choice and was maintained for as long as it served the practical purpose of avoiding costly tensions at the long border with Russia. The so-called “NATO option” was a rather particular and much-debated but nevertheless important part of Finnish security thinking, meaning that Finland reserved the right to reconsider its nonalignment should the security environment change<sup>4</sup>. Putin’s demand on NATO not to accept new members – including Finland and Sweden – in late 2021 directly undermined Finland’s NATO option policy, which Finland’s president Sauli Niinistö addressed in his 2022 New Year’s speech, and reminded that it is Finland’s sovereign right to choose to join NATO<sup>5</sup>.

The deeper implication of the mindset that prevailed in Finland for 80 years is, however, that it will require a substantial change in how to think about security and defence when switching gears from the “spirit of the Winter War” to being part of NATO’s collective defence. While defending the 1,343 km long border to Russia will remain a primarily

<sup>4</sup> M. Ålander, *It’s the National Security, Stupid*, Lawfare, 7 May 2022, <https://www.lawfare-blog.com/its-national-security-stupid> [19.10.2022].

<sup>5</sup> *President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö’s New Year’s Speech on 1 January 2022*, <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinstos-new-years-speech-on-1-january-2022/> [19.10.2022].

Finnish duty and Finland has no intention to outsource any part of its national defence to NATO, Article V nevertheless requires a wider perspective on the security of the whole Alliance beyond national borders or even the Nordic-Baltic region. In the process of preparing for impending membership after submitting the application, emphasis has in Finland been more on the military side and less so on the political aspects of joining the Alliance. Furthermore, NATO's nuclear deterrence is a completely new area of defence thinking that Finland has neither experience with nor much expertise in, having traditionally had a strong focus on conventional territorial defence. The membership application also became reality in a very different way than had been expected, e.g. a 2016 NATO report<sup>6</sup> anticipated a long process both domestically – including a referendum, which ultimately was not held – as well as potentially within NATO.

### **Sweden: Ending 200 years of neutrality**

For Sweden, and especially its Social Democratic Party, the decision to apply for NATO membership presented an identity crisis. The narrative of 200 years of neutrality (or non-alignment after the Cold War), staying out of wars and not being a party to a conflict, instead emphasizing arms control and peacebuilding, has been an integral part of Sweden's foreign policy tradition as a "moral superpower"<sup>7</sup>. Arguably, it was always more a narrative than a reality: Sweden had

<sup>6</sup> M. Bergquist et al., *Arvio Suomen mahdollisen NATO-jäsenyyden vaikutuksista*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> A.-S. Dahl, *Sweden: Once a Moral Superpower, Always a Moral Superpower?*, "International Journal" 2006, vol. 61, no. 4, pp. 895-908.

its own nuclear weapons programme until the early 1970s<sup>8</sup> and secret security assurances from the United States during the Cold War<sup>9</sup>. While maintaining a neutral front, Sweden in fact coordinated closely with NATO and particularly the US during the Cold War. Both the equipment of the Swedish armed forces and the Swedish defence industry have been NATO-interoperable for decades. Thus, despite the formal nonalignment policy, Sweden would have been a very natural member of the Western Alliance long before making it official this year<sup>10</sup>.

In contrast to Finland, where the approach to nonalignment has been a pragmatic one – Finland in fact abandoned the term in 2007 and simply started stating that Finland “is not a member in a defence alliance”<sup>11</sup> – for Sweden it was a more ideological matter. This was reflected in the public debate in Sweden ahead of the decision to apply for membership, and the Social Democratic party in particular had to reconcile its long Olof Palmean tradition of emphasizing the promotion of peace and disarmament, to which membership in a military alliance fits poorly, with the changed security situation and need for rapid decision-making. To a certain extent, Sweden has tended to outsource the political responsibility for its nonalignment and alliance decisions to Finland: in the early decades of the Cold War, it was

<sup>8</sup> T. Jonter, *The Key to Nuclear Restraint: Sweden's Plans to Acquire Nuclear Weapons During the Cold War*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2016.

<sup>9</sup> M. Bergqvist et al., op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> See C. Bergqvist, *Determined by history: Why Finland and Sweden will not be more than NATO partners*, War on the Rocks, 13 July 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/determined-by-history-why-sweden-and-finland-will-not-be-more-than-nato-partners/> [10.11.2022].

<sup>11</sup> M. Bergqvist et al., op. cit.



argued that “the Finnish question” made it necessary for Sweden to stay neutral – otherwise Finland’s situation next to the Soviet Union could have worsened<sup>12</sup>. In a similar vein, in 2022 the then-governing Social Democrats emphasised the need to “go along to NATO with Finland” in the process leading to Finland and Sweden’s joint application – implying that since Finland had made the decision, Sweden had no choice but to join<sup>13</sup>. Finland’s president Sauli Niinistö confirmed the joint application by saying “Sweden’s cause is ours”<sup>14</sup>, in a reversal of the Swedish slogan from the Winter War “Finland’s cause is ours”, and both the Finnish and Swedish governments (both before and after Sweden’s parliamentary elections of September 2022 that lead to a change in government) have continued to emphasise their determination to continue the application process together<sup>15</sup>. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has also expressed a preference for a joint accession of the two countries<sup>16</sup>.

Identity-wise, Nordic cooperation also played an important role for the Swedish decision to apply for NATO membership. Remaining the only Nordic country outside of the

<sup>12</sup> A.-S. Dahl, *Vår neutralitet skulle garantera Finlands frihet*, Svenska Dagbladet, 29 June 2004, <https://www.svd.se/a/47c77d32-0021-3273-ad5d-d37d0fb9ef94/var-neutralitet-skulle-garantera-finlands-frihet> [10.11.2022].

<sup>13</sup> M. Ålander, *A New Security Landscape in Europe: NATO’s Emerging Nordic Dimension*, <https://frivarld.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Minna-SISTA-UTKAST.pdf>, Frivärld, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> J. Wahlgren, *Niinistö: Sverige och Finland står tillsammans*, SVT, 12 May 2022, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/niinisto-sverige-och-finland-star-tillsammans> [19.10.2022].

<sup>15</sup> Finnish Government, *Prime Minister Marin and Swedish Prime Minister Kristersson highlight importance of cooperation between Finland and Sweden*, 28 October 2022, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/10616/prime-minister-marin-and-swedish-prime-minister-kristersson-highlight-importance-of-cooperation-between-finland-and-sweden> [10.11.2022].

<sup>16</sup> *Nato chief: Finland and Sweden should join together*, Yle News, 14 October 2022, <https://yle.fi/news/3-12659031> [10.11.2022].

Alliance would not have been a feasible option, given that Sweden depends on regional security cooperation due to its own insufficient territorial defence capability. Also, simple geography made any serious search for alternatives redundant: Sweden in the middle of the Nordic-Baltic region could not realistically have stayed outside of NATO after Finland made the decision to apply, and as Sweden's then-foreign minister Ann Linde stated, other alternatives were analysed but no viable ones were found<sup>17</sup>. Although support for the decision to join NATO was not initially as self-evident as in Finland, where public opinion changed practically overnight after Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine, it was only logical that Sweden submitted the application together with Finland.

### **NATO's Nordic package deal**

Finland and Sweden are each other's most important partners, and the joint NATO application process has brought the two Nordic neighbours even closer together. Sweden's new prime minister Ulf Kristersson's first international phone call went "self-evidently" to Finland's president Niinistö, and prime minister Kristersson emphasized that the close relationship between the two countries is stronger and more important than ever, which was echoed by president Niinistö<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> R. Nordgren, *Svenska sossarna säger ja till Natomedlemskap*, Huvudstadsbladet, 12 May 2022, <https://www.hbl.fi/artikel/93586140-d452-497c-a617-e86a05c83b48> [19.10.2022].

<sup>18</sup> Sweden's Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson on Twitter, 19 October 2022, <https://twitter.com/SwedishPM/status/1582716972491362305?cxt=HHwWgsCie2s-PYrAAAA>, and Finland's President Sauli Niinistö on Twitter, 18 October 2022, [https://twitter.com/niinisto/status/1582356790506725376?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/niinisto/status/1582356790506725376?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw) [19.10.2022].

The Nordic enlargement is a very significant step for NATO, as it is receiving two new members with advanced defence capabilities – Finland with its wartime troop strength of 280,000 and 870,000 reservists in total, Sweden with fewer troops (approximately 55,000 including reserves) but a strong domestic defence industry. Both countries also excel in countering hybrid threats and have a special skill set and knowledge of Arctic warfare as well as Baltic Sea security. What is more, Finland and Sweden bring integrated bilateral joint structures<sup>19</sup> into NATO, such as the close navy cooperation in the Swedish-Finnish Naval Task Group (SFNTG), Swedish-Finnish Amphibious Task Unit (SFATU) and Sea Surveillance Cooperation Finland and Sweden (SUCFIS). The aim of these joint units is to improve maritime situational awareness in the Baltic Sea as well as deepening cooperation of amphibious troops in the SFATU and all warfare areas except for submarine warfare in the SFNTG, on the operational side<sup>20</sup>. In the land domain, a recent example of Finnish-Swedish defence cooperation was the exercise Vigilant Knife in September 2022, which brought Swedish troops under Finnish command with only a few days of planning in advance<sup>21</sup>. Such an exercise would normally take at least several months to plan but the experiment proved the cooperation to work very well even on short notice. In Lapland, the Finnish and Swedish air forces

<sup>19</sup> M. Jonsson, R. Häggblom, *Cooperation can make the NATO lake reality*, War on the Rocks, 22 August 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/08/cooperation-can-make-the-na-to-lake-a-reality/> [10.11.2022].

<sup>20</sup> M. Villikari, *Finnish – Swedish naval co-operation*, "Baltic Rim Economies" 2019, no. 2, Expert article 2524.

<sup>21</sup> *Finland hosts historic military training drill, Swedish forces under Finnish command*, Yle News, 2 September 2022, <https://yle.fi/news/3-12607712> [19.10.2022].

fly joint training exercises with their Norwegian counterparts on a near weekly basis. Since 2017, the Nordic countries also have established a joint air surveillance initiative (NORECAS, Nordic Enhanced Cooperation on Air Surveillance). Nordic cooperation is likely to experience a significant boost when the remaining structural limitations are removed through Finland and Sweden's NATO accession. As Sweden's defence forces put it: "The Nordics is a fantastic part of the world that is worth defending"<sup>22</sup>.

### **Hand in hand all the way?**

How inseparable the Nordic duo will remain throughout the NATO process will be tested by the remaining two NATO members to ratify their memberships, Hungary and especially Turkey, which is withholding its ratification on grounds of objections towards the Nordic enlargement and Sweden's membership in particular<sup>23</sup>. Finland's membership application has been to a large part collateral damage in the equation. It could therefore become a tough test for Finnish-Swedish solidarity if Turkey decided to ratify Finland first but leave Sweden in the waiting room until Turkey's security concerns regarding terrorism have been sufficiently addressed on Sweden's part – as Turkey's President Recep

<sup>22</sup> Försvarsmakten, *Defence cooperation with Finland*, last updated 8 January 2020, <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/about/organisation/defence-cooperation-with-finland/> [20.10.2022].

<sup>23</sup> T. Alaranta, *NATO's Nordic enlargement and Turkey's reservations: Trilateral Memorandum of Understanding in the context of Turkey's wider strategic interests*, "FIIA Briefing Paper", no. 359, September 2022.

Tayyip Erdogan signalled in October 2022<sup>24</sup>. So far Finland and Sweden have pledged to stick together.

Separating the applications would be unwise as it would undermine the little leverage the countries have in the process vis-à-vis Turkey. If Turkey were to keep Sweden in the waiting room for a longer period of time, it would also create a strategic vulnerability and difficulties for NATO's defence planning due to Sweden's geographic location in the middle of the Nordic region and the BSR. As the Swedish armed forces correctly identify in their recommendations on Sweden's NATO membership, the Swedish geography and resources can become part of several Allies' defence solutions and play an important role for security of supply in the region<sup>25</sup> – but vice versa, should Sweden's membership remain blocked by Turkey for a long time, it could create problems for the Allies in the region. Since Ukraine has made sure that Russia will need several years to rebuild its military capacity to a level that can become an acute threat to the countries, Finland and Sweden should rather use the time to complete the accession process together and not let Turkey's pressure tactics divide the Nordic applicants in the process.

<sup>24</sup> E. Kervinen, T. Sutinen, *Entä jos Turkki ratifioisi vain Suomen Nato-jäsenyyden? "Tämä on hieman hermopeliä", sanoo Haavisto*, Helsingin Sanomat, 7 October 2022, <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000009119970.html> [20.10.2022].

<sup>25</sup> Försvarsmakten, *Överbefälhavarens råd avseende svenskt Natomedlemskap*, FM2022-19979:13, 31 October 2022.



Paulina Siegień

## **Kaliningrad Oblast at war**

There are three significant elements that should be discussed when reflecting on the conditions in Kaliningrad Oblast and Kaliningrad's role during Russia's war against Ukraine. First is the socio-economic situation of the region in the face of Western sanctions and transportation restrictions implemented as a result of Russia's aggression. Secondly, there are various forms of direct participation of the Kaliningrad region in the war. And third is the role of Kaliningrad Oblast as a destabilizing factor in the BSR.

### **Kaliningrad and the price of war**

By virtue of its location and economic structure, the Kaliningrad Oblast is the region of the Russian Federation that is most severely affected by Russia's decision to invade Ukraine and the consequences that this decision entailed, i.e. the sanctions and transport restrictions imposed by the West. These include several measures against sectors of the Russian economy, the banking system and logistics. Many Western companies preemptively decided to leave the Rus-

sian market and sever cooperation with existing Russian contractors for image reasons and for fear of violating US, UK or European Union sanction regulations.

This has put Kaliningrad-based companies in an extremely difficult position, as the business model of many of them was based on buying cheap raw material from the West, processing it in the region and shipping it to the rest of Russia to sell. So, on the one hand, Kaliningrad-based companies have had to quickly find new contractors to supply them with the components they need for production, while on the other hand, they have to overcome transportation barriers. The European Union has closed its airspace to Russian-registered airlines and aircraft, the transport of sanctioned goods to Russia is prohibited, and transit through Lithuania between the exclave, Belorussia and Russia has been limited. Maintaining production levels, and the profitability of businesses in general, now depends solely on the willingness of the federal authorities to take on the additional costs generated by the new situation. To ensure supplies to and from the region, a ferry service to the port of Ust-Luga in the Leningrad region has been launched, but the cost of shipping is many times that of rail or road transport. Therefore, the Kremlin has set aside special subsidies for these transports. In fact, however, the region's economy is operating in an emergency model, and the crucial question is how long Kaliningrad business people will be able to operate in this way and how long they will see sense in it, especially since there is no prospect of improving the situation. It can be expected that as the Russian state's financial capabilities are depleted, the level of support for sanctions-affected businesses will decline and companies will gradually close.

In turn, this will result in unemployment, and falling incomes and living standards.

Transportation restrictions, such as the closure of European airspace, the closure of land borders maintained first by Russia itself from the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 until July 2022, and the subsequent imposition by Poland and Lithuania of a bar on Russian citizens with tourist Schengen visas in September 2022 are causing the Kaliningrad region to lose its appeal as Russia's most western and Westernized region from which travel to Europe is easy, cheap and accessible. Belonging even if not to a culture, but at least to a common European space, has been an important part of local identity in recent decades and has been a magnet attracting migration to the region from other parts of Russia<sup>1</sup>.

This is important because migration is the only source of demographic growth for the region. The Kaliningrad region has had negative population growth for many years. In 2021, there were almost twice as many deaths (15,984) as births (8,958). Population growth surpassed 1 million in 2018 due solely to new residents settling in the region. Aleksey Silanov, chairman of the Committee on Social Policy, referring to statistics, said that in the first half of 2022, for the first time in several years "natural population decline was not compensated by migration"<sup>2</sup>. We can also expect that the number of deaths in 2022 will be much higher due to the participation of units from Kaliningrad and mobi-

<sup>1</sup> P. Siegień, *Miasto bajka. Wiele historii Kaliningradu*, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec 2021.

<sup>2</sup> В 2021 году смертность в Калининградской области почти вдвое превысила рождаемость, Rugrad.online, 5 November 2022, [https://rugrad.online/smi/1308711/\[05.11.2022\]](https://rugrad.online/smi/1308711/[05.11.2022]).



lized soldiers from the region in the hostilities in Ukraine. One should also not forget that although so far there is no data that would show the scale of the phenomenon, many Kaliningraders with antiwar views have decided to emigrate from the region or are preparing to leave Russia soon, while for others the decision to leave was suddenly accelerated by the mobilization campaign announced by Vladimir Putin on 21 September 2022.

The region's poor economic condition, low wages, potential unemployment and, on top of that, isolation will contribute to the decline of its population. In the long run, all of the above-mentioned phenomena will lead to social, economic and demographic degradation of the Kaliningrad region.

### **Kaliningrad Oblast and its participation in warfare and the occupation of Ukraine**

The Kaliningrad region, as a region of the Russian Federation, is involved at various levels in the war against Ukraine. In the first phase of the aggression that has been ongoing since February 2022, this has primarily involved the participation of soldiers from units stationed in the Kaliningrad region, and since September 2022 has also included the participation of those mobilized in the region. The participation of professional and mobilized soldiers from the Kaliningrad region in the war against Ukraine has not only a moral dimension but as was already said contributes directly to the deepening of negative demographic trends in the region.

As recently as March 2022, funerals were held in Kaliningrad for participants in the so-called special operation, including high-ranking officers, which clearly indicated the participation of soldiers from the region in the war in

Ukraine. The turning point, however, was the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region at the beginning of September 2022. According to the findings of military experts, which have been confirmed by, among others, Reuters journalists<sup>3</sup> who provided documents abandoned by the Russians in the de-occupied territories of Ukraine, the 11th Army Corps of the Russian Navy under the command of the Baltic Fleet was heavily depleted during this offensive. These are units usually stationed in the Kaliningrad region, which included a motorized division, a separate motorized regiment, artillery, rockets, air-defence troops and supporting units. In total, the size of the 11th Army Corps was estimated at 12,000 troops, whose task was to defend the Kaliningrad region in the event of a NATO attack or to take part in offensives against neighbouring countries, e.g. to take control over the Suwałki Gap.

Although neither the civilian nor military Russian authorities have in any way addressed information about the 11th Army Corps and its losses in Ukraine, confirmation is again provided by funerals. In September, smaller towns in the Kaliningrad region began one by one to cancel town day celebrations, as too many funerals of “special operation” participants were taking place at the same time. The organization of concerts and dance parties was deemed inappropriate. There were also declarations from the local authorities that the funds thus saved would be transferred to the families of the “fallen” soldiers. Military experts are

<sup>3</sup> M. Saito, M. Tsvetkova and A. Zverev, *Abandoned Russian base holds secrets of retreat in Ukraine*, Reuters Investigates, 26 October 2022, [https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-russia-base/?utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_medium=Social](https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-russia-base/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=Social) [05.11.2022].

increasingly boldly putting forward the thesis that the Kaliningrad region is effectively defenceless<sup>4</sup>, and in the event of a wartime escalation, there are not enough military personnel there for defensive operations. The region's lowering military potential is also affected by the mobilization of reservists, which began on 21 September and has no formal end in sight. It means that men capable of military service have been or will be sent to the front lines in Ukraine. It is difficult to estimate what missile assets remain in Kaliningrad, as these have also already been used against Ukraine. Because even in the case of demilitarization of the region in terms of human resources, the Kaliningrad region as the location of Iskander missile complexes capable of carrying nuclear warheads does not completely lose its function as Europe's bogeyman.

In addition to the participation of soldiers from the Kaliningrad region on the battlefield in Ukraine, the regional government, regional administration and subordinate structures have been involved in the occupation of Kherson and parts of the Kherson region. At the beginning of July 2022, high-ranking officials from Kaliningrad have been given positions in the occupying military-civilian administration of Kherson. In August, the regional governor of Kaliningrad, Anton Alikhanov, officially announced that the Kaliningrad region has taken "headship" over part of the Kherson region during what was called a working visit to Kherson.

<sup>4</sup> D. Axe, *12,000 Russian Troops Were Supposed To Defend Kaliningrad. Then They Went To Ukraine To Die*, Forbes, 27 October 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2022/10/27/12000-russian-troops-once-posed-a-threat-from-inside-nato-then-they-went-to-ukraine-to-die/?sh=751381f33375> [05.11.2022].

According to information reported by Russian government agencies, Alikhanov brought to Kherson humanitarian aid and launched there a new Russian television channel. He declared that Kaliningrad would provide support to Kherson in the agricultural, economical, educational and social spheres. Alikhanov also confirmed that Kaliningrad region administration personnel are active in the Kherson region.

The Kaliningrad region is not the only region of Russia that has been tasked with “taking charge of” occupied (and since 30 September, in Russia’s view, incorporated) territories, but the fact that the only major regional city occupied by Russian troops after 24 February has been placed under Kaliningrad’s auspices demonstrates the Kremlin’s special confidence in the regional authorities.

This can be explained by the fact that the originator of the idea of merging occupied territories with Russian regions is Sergey Kiriyyenko, who, after the failures of Vladislav Surkov and Dmitry Kozak, became the so-called curator of Ukrainian policy in the administration of the Russian president. Kiriyyenko’s task was to bring about the quickest possible integration of Ukrainian territories occupied by the Russian army into the Russian political, economic, and social system. In turn, a few years earlier, Kiriyyenko invented a programme to create new cadres for the bureaucratic machine of Putin’s Russia. People who went through this programme and later took up important positions were called “young technocrats”. One of them is Anton Alikhanov, governor of the Kaliningrad region since 2016. Thus, it can be thought

that Alikhanov and his team enjoy the confidence of Kiri-yenko, who has entrusted him with the responsibilities of occupying the Kherson region.

As the development of events shows, this kind of involvement carries specific risks. Legal liability aside (Yeliseyev and Bespalov have been sanctioned by the EU and UK), lives can be lost in Kherson as the Ukrainian army is using point shelling to try to eliminate the occupation authorities. In one such shelling on 30 September, the very day Putin announced in the Kremlin the annexation of Ukraine's occupied territories, another representative of the occupation authorities with Kaliningrad origins, Alexei Katerynichev, who served in the border Federal Security Service (FSB) troops, was killed. As this text is being written, the Ukrainian army is preparing for an offensive to retake Kherson, while the Russian side's actions indicate preparations for defence, but also an attempt to confuse the enemy. As part of these actions, the Russian occupiers decided to deport the population from parts of the Kherson region. Although such deportation to the Kaliningrad region would be acutely complicated due to the location of the two regions, the Kaliningrad governor momentarily declared his readiness to accept refugees from Kherson. Whether Ukrainians from there will end up in the Kaliningrad region is difficult to assess at the moment, but such an eventuality should be anticipated. Ukrainians from occupied territories that have been forcibly resettled to Russia often seek the possibility to leave for Europe. So Poland and Lithuania should prepare border procedures to allow them to enter from Kaliningrad.

## **Kaliningrad Oblast as a source of tensions and crises in the Baltic Sea Region**

Over the past decade, the Kaliningrad region has regularly appeared in expert analyses<sup>5</sup> as a potential flashpoint for a new war in Europe. Traditionally, such statements have pointed to a combination of its geographic location between two countries that are members of the European Union and, above all, NATO, and the high level of militarization of the region, where the Russian Baltic Fleet is stationed. Of course, it should be emphasized that it was the location of the region, which was for the USSR a war trophy won at the expense of Germany, specifically East Prussia, that provided the rationale first for the Soviet and then for the Russian leadership to arm the region, and in the chronology of the rationale one can go even further – the region's strategic location from a military point of view was Stalin's primary motivation for making territorial demands on this part of East Prussia during the peace conferences in Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam.

The Russian government regularly declares that the war they are waging is not just against Ukraine and Ukrainians but against the entire West, personified by NATO. All of the new security guarantees that Russia demanded from the West in December 2021 showed that it rejects the security system that has been established in Europe, demanding that NATO's borders be restored to what they were in 1997 before the accession of Poland and the Baltic states. All this makes the neighbourhood of the militarized Russian enclave, as

<sup>5</sup> Z. Sliwa and V. Veebel, *Kaliningrad, the Suwalki gap and Russia's ambitions in the Baltic Region*, "Journal of International Studies" 2019, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 109-121.

perceived by Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and also other Baltic Sea states, a source of tension, potential conflict and, above all, threats of escalation. For the countries of the BSR, with ongoing changes in the security structure due to the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, the Kaliningrad region has and will continue to serve as a source of tension and crises. Most vulnerable to such hostile actions is Lithuania, through whose territory there is a transit of people and goods between the Kaliningrad region and Belarus and further to the rest of Russia.

We could already witness such a crisis in June 2022, when Russia staged a scandal regarding the transit of sanctioned goods to and from Kaliningrad. In June 2022, Lithuania began imposing restrictions on the rail transit of Russian goods moving between the Kaliningrad region via Belarus to Russia. In doing so, Lithuania was implementing the provisions of the fourth package of sanctions, adopted back in March, after the end of the relevant transition period. The restrictions caused a scandal, which was exaggerated by Russia. There were accusations of an attempt to blockade Kaliningrad. The Kremlin accused Lithuania and the European Union of violating international agreements and the commitments it made to Russia to expand the alliance. One of the commitments that emerged relating to Russia was a guarantee of free transit for goods and people from/to the Kaliningrad region through Lithuania.

The crisis was averted when the European Commission issued an updated instruction on the implementation of the sanction's legislation. This allowed for an exception to be made for transit to/from the Kaliningrad region but imposed restrictions. The annual volume of sanctioned goods

transiting Lithuania must not exceed the average for the category of goods in question over the previous three years.

During the course of this crisis, concerns about the possibility of an escalation to the conflict manifested themselves very strongly. The eyes of the world turned to the Suwałki Gap, which was called at that moment the most dangerous place on earth<sup>6</sup>. Experts and analysts warned of such a threat, also pointing to the possibility of other Russian provocations. Although Russia has officially voiced its displeasure with the solution the European Commission recommended, it has not taken any action to undermine it. Nor has it so far resorted to any serious provocations in connection with transit to/from Kaliningrad. The fact that no such actions from the Russian side have occurred may indicate, first of all, that Russia is severely weakened and focused at directing all its resources to keep the war going in Ukraine. Sending troops from Kaliningrad to fight in Ukraine and mobilizing men from the region, which leaves the exclave defenceless, also provides evidence to support this thesis.

## Conclusions and recommendations

It seems clear that the renewal of any contacts and relations with the Kaliningrad region by Baltic neighbours and partners will be possible only on the condition that the war in Ukraine ends and the ruling regime in Russia changes. However, even in such a case, it is necessary to remember the involvement of individuals and institutions from Kaliningrad in the occupation of Ukrainian territories. Contacts

<sup>6</sup> M. Karnitschnig, *The Most Dangerous Place On Earth*, Politico, 20 June 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/suwalki-gap-russia-war-nato-lithuania-poland-border/> [05.11.2022].



should be preceded by a thorough vetting of individuals, organizations and institutions with whom relations are to be undertaken. People who are involved in the war and the occupation of Ukraine's territories should be on the sanctions list, and after the war ends, they should be judged for this involvement. It should also be presumed that the longer Russian aggression against Ukraine continues, the greater will be the socio-economic degradation of the Kaliningrad region and the deeper its isolation. It should therefore be presumed that the social situation in Kaliningrad will be difficult and may require special measures.

As long as the war continues, the Kaliningrad region will occasionally fulfil its original intended function, that is, to be a source of threats, tensions and crises in the region. Although the political authorities and the military command must reckon with various scenarios including the scenario of wartime escalation and be ready for them at any time, there is a lot of evidence that proves the weakening of Russia's ability to use Kaliningrad as either a tool of blackmail or a source of provocation.



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"Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 marks a new era in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). This critical juncture triggers an increasing perception of insecurity among the regional stakeholders and leads to profound changes in the identification patterns in and among the BSR states. The consequences of the present critical juncture significantly affect the region, its institutions and the security situation of the BSR states. These developments call for renewed attention of the scientific community to the rapidly changing international environment and its consequences to the future of regionalisation in the Baltic Sea area.

With this publication, the Institute of Central Europe (IEŚ) in Lublin contributes to a broader expert discussion aimed at a better understanding of the nature of ongoing changes, and their implications for regional cooperation and the security policies of the BSR states. This Policy Paper, written by international experts specialising in the Baltic Sea and Northern European regionalism, also offers an assessment of the ongoing identity narratives which could lead to changing ideologies and regional imaginaries, and which may potentially create new ontological foundations for the BSR."

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