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## **The Council of the Baltic Sea States: regional cooperation in Times of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine.**

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**The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) states, during their meeting in Wismar on June 1-2, 2023, concluded Germany's one-year presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). The Presidency was driven by Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war for the region. The ongoing discussion about the future of the BSR is focused on rethinking regional security and redefinition of regional cooperation.**

**The German Presidency of the CBSS.** Germany assumed the Presidency of the CBSS on July 1, 2022. During the previous ministerial meeting in May 2022 (Kristiansand, Norway), the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Annalena Baerbock, indicated the priorities of the Presidency. They included enhancing energy security, youth cooperation, and intensifying efforts to address the issue of ammunition and chemical weapons dumped on the bottom of the Baltic Sea after the end of the Second World War (["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 616](#)).

During the Wismar meeting, the ministers focused on summarizing the German Presidency. Firstly, it was recognized that, in the CBSS, offshore wind energy has the greatest potential to become the main source of renewable energy. The Baltic Sea Offshore Wind Energy Forum, held in early May 2023, concluded with the signing of the Berlin Declaration on Baltic Offshore Wind, emphasizing its significant potential, capable of reaching 93 GW of capacity for the entire BSR (see more: ["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 314](#)). According to the non-binding targets agreed on January 19, 2023, offshore wind farms in the Baltic Sea are expected to reach a capacity of 22.5 GW by 2030, 34.6 GW by 2040, and 46.8 GW by 2050. The current agreement refers directly to the Marienborg Declaration, signed on August 30, 2022 by the heads of government of the BSR states during the Baltic Energy Security Summit. In light of the statements made by representatives of the BSR states, this energy source is intended to eliminate dependence on fossil fuels imported from Russia as soon as possible, reduce electricity prices and, at the same time, should support the states of the region in combating climate change and achieving climate neutrality by 2050. However, offshore wind development requires strengthening financial instruments and diplomatic efforts as well as broader cooperation and coordination of actions aimed at protecting critical energy infrastructure in the Baltic Sea.

Secondly, an important element of the discussion among the foreign ministers was to enhance the resilience of societies in the BSR, thereby increasing the ability of CBSS states' societies to resist destructive actions and to recover from crises/shocks (see more: ["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 824](#)). This is to be achieved through strengthening civilian preparedness, countering disinformation and false narratives, and protecting and increasing the resilience of critical infrastructure. Of particular importance for the effectiveness of these actions in the future is the involvement of youth, which is supported by the Baltic Sea Region Youth Forum (BSRYF), launched in January 2023.

**Consequences of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine for Regional Cooperation.** Ministers gathered in Wismar were convinced that Russia's aggression would have long-lasting consequences for the BSR, especially in the realm of security. For the first time, there were many direct references in the final declaration to the security threats posed by, among other things, the repeated aggressive and provocative actions of Russia's navy and air fleet. In the Council's 30-plus year history to date, the organisation has habitually avoided topics related to military security (see more: ["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 53](#)). This means that Russia's invasion of Ukraine will have long-term consequences for the CBSS, including a progressive change in threat perception and the 'Natoisation' of the region, understood as the increasing presence of NATO allied forces (see more: ["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 649](#)).

The CBSS member states intend to provide extensive support to Ukraine as well as maintain sanctions against Russia. Research by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy shows that during the first year of the war, the BSR states provided a total of €17.7 billion in support to Ukraine, with Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Norway, and Poland being among the top five states in terms of support when measured as a share of their GDP. Taking into account new support packages and the adopted long-term plans of Norway ([“IEŚ Commentaries”, No. 804](#)), Denmark ([“IEŚ Commentaries”, No. 852](#)), Finland ([“IEŚ Commentaries”, No. 814](#)), and the rest of BSR states, the total value of bilateral military, humanitarian, and financial assistance is close to €30 billion. Furthermore, according to Eurostat, the number of people who have fled Ukraine and been placed under the temporary protection scheme in the BSR states as of the end of April 2023 was close to 2.4 million (more than 60% of all refugees covered by this scheme), of whom Germany and Poland had the largest number of refugees receiving care. Moreover, in the case of Poland and the Baltic States, the indicator showing the number of granted permits per 1,000 inhabitants exceeded 20 (compared to the EU/EFTA average of 8.9), which illustrates the scale of solidarity among the inhabitants of these states.

**The future of the BSR: processes of rethinking and redefining (2R).** Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is a turning point not only for Ukraine and Eastern Europe but also for the entire BSR, which has become a front-line region. The political and social processes initiated lead to two trends. Firstly, to a rethinking of regional security. Although the outcome of the NATO summit in Vilnius is still unknown, the current activities of the states are aimed at strengthening the security of the BSR by boosting the ability of the allied forces to defend the territory of NATO member states. This means that the issue of military security and the perception of Russia’s policy as a direct threat has become dominant in the foreign and security policy of all states in the region. This is particularly relevant for parts of the Nordic states and Germany, as the Baltic states and Poland have warned of the consequences of Russia’s imperial policy since 2008.

Secondly, there is a need to redefine regional cooperation (redefining regional cooperation) due to the lack of stability, predictability and trust towards Russia. In the long term, this will significantly hamper activities even in those spheres where the involvement of all the BSR states (including Russia) is necessary to achieve the set goals, such as the protection of the Baltic Sea marine environment, its biodiversity, or the effectiveness of joint S&R operations (see more: [“Prace IEŚ”, No. 12/2022](#)). This translates into the agenda of regional meetings and actions taken by the main regional organisations –the CBSS and the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM). Russia was suspended from the CBSS and the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference in early March 2022 and decided to withdraw from both structures on 17 May 2022 (see more: [“IEŚ Commentaries”, No. 561](#)). HELCOM, on the other hand, has been on a so-called ‘strategic pause’ since March 2022, which means no official meetings of the Parties to the Helsinki Convention. However, Russia remains a Party to the Convention and HELCOM is undertaking activities in monitoring the state of the Baltic Sea environment (the third holistic assessment of the Baltic Sea: HOLAS III) and implementing the 2021 updated Baltic Sea Action Plan: BSAP 2021 (see more: [“IEŚ Commentaries”, no. 286](#)).

## Conclusions

- The changes occurring in the BSR are slow, but they are moving towards an evolution of regional identity and a change in state policies towards Russia. These include the Zeitenwende process in Germany, evidencing a confrontation with the long-standing practice of ‘Russia First’, Finland’s efforts (completed on 4 April 2023), and Sweden’s ongoing pursuit of NATO membership, as well as Denmark’s changing approach towards integration in the field of EU security and defence policy. In addition, collective memories of the Second World War traumas have become important arguments for pursuing a firm policy towards Russia in Finland, the Baltic States, and Poland.
- The CBSS remains an important facilitator of global commitments in the BSR (UN Sustainable Development Goals and Paris Agreement climate goals) and the coordination of regional structures - the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) and the VASAB Committee (Visions and Strategies around the Baltic

Sea). Together, they participate in the multi-level governance of processes in the region, and the CBSS enables policy dialogue on issues of common interest and functions as an instrument for practical cooperation.

- However, more decisive steps need to be taken to address the issue of conventional and chemical weapons dumped at the bottom of the Baltic Sea after World War II (see more: "IEŚ Commentaries", No. 343). Multidisciplinary, cross-sectoral and macro-regional dialogue and the exchange of national experiences, while being important parts of the decision-making process, should not lead to delays in taking the relevant political decisions, seeking funding, and starting to dismantle and dispose of the dumped weapons.