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Baltic Sea macro-region

The Baltic region is chronologically the first of the four European macroregions. Founded in 2009, it has often been described as a laboratory for transnational governance or a source of inspiration for future initiatives. It has also contributed to the evolution and generalization of the macroregional tool since Danuta Hübner, then Commissioner for Regional Policy, participated in the dissemination of the concept of "macro-region" in 2008, using it regularly in several communications, documents and internal notes. The configuration of the Baltic space echoes the ideal of cohesion pursued by the European Union since the mid-1990s. The area has significant territorial disparities (existence of northern sparsely populated margins but also a core, called the Baltic Blue Banana, composed of a strip joining the main metropolises from Hamburg to Helsinki, with Copenhagen and Stockholm), common challenges, specific geographical features around an eponymous sea, potential interfaces offered at the eastern border of the EU. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the public bodies of the bordering countries and the European institutions have transformed the Baltic Sea in a performative space: in nominating it systematically and presenting it as obvious, they made its existence achievable for all the actors. The Baltic Sea macro-region combines both a large amount of umbrella structures that must be channelled, and strong strategic issues requiring urgent solutions and transnational coordination of spatial management: risk of a biological death of the sea, incompatibility of transport and energy networks between the two former blocks, multilevel marine spatial planning. Even if the EU macro-regional strategies are somewhat recent, the Baltic Sea Region has now a long cooperation history and several platforms play an important role at different scales, such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), or the Baltic Sea States Sub-regional cooperation (BSSSC).

However, the idea of transversal structuring is therefore precocious. As early as 2005, Christopher Beazley, a British MEP and member of the "Baltic-Europe" Inter Group, published a report calling for a new strategy for the Northern Dimension in an enlarged European Union. It was followed by the parliamentary resolution "A Baltic Sea Strategy for the Northern Dimension" by the Alexander Stubb at that time Finnish Member of the European Parliament in November 2006. On December 2007, the European Council calls for a European Strategy in the Baltic Sea "connected" with the Northern Dimension. The European Strategy in the Baltic Sea is finally adopted on June 2009 by the European Commission and on October 2009 by the European Council after an open consultation of the riparian stakeholders (mainly regional authorities and national and supranational networks of local and regional actors).

While the EU strategy for the Danube Region or the EU strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian region include a large number of non-member states (Ukraine, Moldova, Montenegro, Albania), the final text of the Commission establishes a clear distinction in the Baltic Sea area between the strategy itself, which concerns only the internal EU affairs and the external affairs regulated by the "Northern Dimension". Russia, Norway and Belarus are thus partners opening up a cooperation respectively close or constructive, which limits the achievement of the objectives set - as long as security and geopolitical issues are left aside - and hinder the strategic interactions with the North Sea and the Arctic. The Crimean crisis

in February and March 2014 has strengthened this division making it financially difficult for Russian actors to participate to projects, enabling the implementation of the strategy. The accession of Poland and the Baltic States in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), in 1999 and 2004 respectively, and their integration in the European Union (EU) in 2004 has caused new tensions with Russia. The Russian pressure on the Eastern part of the Baltic sea has however accelerated during 2007 just before the economic crisis, i.e. Moscow's reactions to the removal of the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn (a monument erected in memory of the Soviet soldiers of World War II which was still a true symbol of identity for the Russian community living in Estonia and for the Russian government), the economic sanctions imposed by the Russian administrations and companies, the Estonian cyber-attacks (supposed to be initiated by Russian secret services). The Ukrainian crisis has finally led to an escalation of intimidations between NATO, the European Union, the United States, Russia and China. Hybrid conflicts in the Baltic Sea thus bring to multiple vulnerabilities touching directly territorial cooperation.

According to the website of the macroregion, the key ambitions of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region are divided into three objectives: saving the sea, connecting the region and increasing prosperity. The political networks involved have attempted to overcome the existing large structural disparities between the western and the eastern part of the region, to face common challenges (as sea pollution, efficient management of natural resources, research of alternative energy sources, sustainable transport), to foster economic growth, to enable interterritorial strategies and to use pooled financing to create greater coherence among different projects. Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme or the Nordic and European Investment Banks (IEB) finance, among several other sources of funding, several EUBSR flagship projects. The Baltic Sea Region strategy is supposed to allow a more optimal and more coherent use of the funds allocated by the EU and to target program projects around clear guidelines.

In 2017, Ministries, state agencies, universities, research institutes and private actors are more involved in pilot-projects or pilot sub-projects than municipal or regional authorities (considered singly or in proactive networks like the Union of Baltic Cities). The most active local actors (municipalities, harbours authorities, universities and research centers, foundations, companies) are located around the Gulf of Finland and its hinterland (Tallinn, Riga, Helsinki, Stockholm, Turku, Tartu), mostly on the North shore (most of which are along the Baltic "Blue Banana").

The Baltic Sea macro-region is a combination of networks of actors and projects, which has oriented the interterritorial trajectories to meeting the challenges implying a necessary territorial continuity, one of the main common objectives. This leads to rescaling processes and the emergence of a new geography of in-between with variable geometry, even if the major actors involved are located in the EU. In fact, it combines two contradictory orientations: a functional/place-based approach under the classical leadership of states and their ministries (National Coordinators, Policy Area Coordinators). Without any institutional framework, nor financial and territorial supports, it enables the reinforcement of intermediary spaces at different scales (urban regions, cross-border cooperation, transnational platforms).

The Baltic Sea macro-region strategy has difficulties in achieving its objectives at this transnational scale. The absence of Russia and Belarus as full members does not help to solve the main regional issues, particularly the environmental ones. For example, 184 sites do not dispose of functioning water treatment plants in the Leningrad oblast in Russia. The absence of local actors (municipalities, regions) among the Policy Area Coordinators (PACs) affects subsidiarity and local empowerment. The local population is not informed about the objectives of the strategy and therefore is weakly involved in the projects. The single spatial emblem to the macro-region is a monument erected in Klaipėda in Lithuania, which indicates on the ground the distances separating the city from the neighbouring countries. The diversity of the geostrategic policy issues of each state is also an obstacle to the achievement of a common strategy of the Baltic region. The Baltic States and Finland are still interested in deepening their relations with Asian countries especially in tourism, trade, and transport. The creation of an Arctic Corridor extending towards the Via baltica and the Rail baltica could be a common issue. But for instance, no coherent strategy is emerging. Despite the broker role of Sweden, preventing the escalation of tensions in the Baltic Sea, the difficulties to implement common projects, like Rail Baltica, still remain.

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