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The Baltic Sea Region: Constitution and Reinvention of a (Maritime) Region

(Der Ostseeraum: Konstitution und Neuerfindung einer (maritimen) Region)

Abstract:

The political changes of 1989 stimulated a new perception and perspective of the Baltic Sea Region. And this gained momentum with the Eastern Enlargement of the EU. The new situation encouraged research as well. In this context the “Baltic Sea” is not an unchangeable physical setting, but also a construction of different actors or protagonists. People and powers continuously reinvent the Baltic Sea Region. That is why, the following paper focuses on the different notions of the Baltic Sea Region from the Middle Ages up to now and also examines the recent EU-Strategy of this region.

Examining region building, I am following the various approaches of the Finish geographer Anssi Paasi, who contends that “regions are social constructs” and asks “who or what ‘constructs’ them?”.¹ He distinguishes four stages of region building which are at the same time reflected in a process of border-shaping or bordering.²

- 1) The region building or bordering process can be “hard” or “soft,” “inclusive to exclusive”.
- 2) The region building or bordering process can be symbolic with reference to the naming and signification.
- 3) The region building or bordering process can be an institutionalizing process with reference to the development of formal and informal institutions.
- 4) The region building or bordering process culminates in the acceptance of the region as part of a regional system and broader consciousness.

This paper shows that the Baltic Sea Region underwent significant constructions by various protagonists from the period of Adam of Bremen in the 11th and the Hansa in the 13th century, via the Nordic Powers and the Dutch Republic in the 17th century, up to the EU-Strategy of 2009. Whereas Adam of Bremen constructed the Baltic as a missionary region, the Hansa and the Dutch constituted the Baltic Sea as a trading area. Although, the Baltic Sea Area remains to be a trading area until now, from the 16th century in the eyes of rulers and politicians, the Baltic Sea Area became an area of warfare and struggle for dominium. Whilst the 19th century acknowledged cultural exchanges and the early 20th century political cooperation as element of the region, the Soviet dominated “Sea of Peace” was only redesigned as a “New Hanseatic Area” in the 1980s. After 1989 freedom followed peace. EU membership and finally the EU-Strategy of 2009 gave the area a new design as a model region of regional integration.

These different notions of the Baltic Sea and Baltic Sea Region elucidate the constructiveness of a region, which is often ignored by politicians and even by contemporary historians. Coming back to Paasi's stages we witness that the Baltic Sea Region has passed through the first three stages, but is not yet widely accepted in a broader consciousness.

It is therefore most important to communicate the history and as well the present EU-strategy into the minds of the people living on the Baltic coasts. Only this mediation process, could contribute to the reinvention of the Baltic Sea Region as a Model Region for European Integration across the region. This could stimulate regional cooperation in other regions such as the Mediterranean, the Black Sea area or even the South China Sea.³

Understanding region building in the Baltic Sea Region will also enhance the comparative study of maritime regions by historians. This approach might put the sea and those moving across and around the sea in the focus of attention and examine the agency behind region building.

¹ Anssi Paasi, "The resurgence of the 'Region' and 'Regional Identity': Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Observations on Regional Dynamics in Europe," *Review of International Studies* 35 (2009), 124-46. Anssi Paasi, "Regions are social constructs, but who or what 'constructs' them? Agency in question," *Environment and Planning A* 42 (2010): 2296-2301.

² Henk van Houtum, Olivier Kramsch and Wolfgang Zierhofer (eds.), *B/ordering Space*, Aldershot 2005.

³ Michael North, *The Baltic: A History*. Cambridge, MA 2015. Michael North and Barnard Turner, "The Baltic Sea and South China Sea Regions: Incomparable Models of Regional Integration?," *Asia Europe Journal* 8 (2010): 271-77.