

The Russian Post-Soviet Discourse on Baltic Regionalism (1990-2015)

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This paper examines the Russian post-Soviet academic and political discourses on regionalism in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Russian academic and expert communities were rather receptive to the European concepts and models of regionalism in the BSR. The first strand of Russian political thinking was the liberal philosophy of *normative engagement* based on the perception of European values as universal and thus amenable for outward projection in the form of region-building. This model included a strong component of good governance/governmentality techniques, largely substantiated by modernization theory.

The second strand was a *post-modern* vision of the world as allegedly moving towards de-bordering, de-securitization, de-territorialization and networking.

The cumulative effect of these approaches was a model of de-bordered regional networking, conceptualized in terms of transformation from antagonisms to security community. In this vision of regionalism, institutions matter more than hard power, and individual interests of nation states can be effectively managed in a synergetic way.

These approaches fostered the perception of the BSR as an almost “inner European sea”, with some Russian regions (Kaliningrad, Karelia, Novgorod, St. Petersburg) – culturally and historically more Europeanized in comparison to the rest of the country – expected to join in. The projects like a New Hanseatic League, Kaliningrad as a ‘pilot region’ or Russian ‘Hong Kong’ were popular among the Russian neoliberal and post-modern thinkers.

The Baltic regionalism succeeded in creating a cohesive space for interaction among all actors committed to do away with East–West divides. On its way towards a “thick” regional community the BSR attained a high density of communication through creating such regional institutions as, for example, the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), VASAB (Vision and Strategies around the Baltic Sea – spatial planning and development), Helsinki Commission (environmental issues), International Baltic Sea Fishery Commission, Baltic Sea States Subregional Cooperation, the Union of Baltic Cities, the City Twins Association, the Baltic Development Forum, Baltic Sea Region University Network, Baltic Science Network, and Baltic TRAM (Transnational Research Access in the Macroregion). The Nordic institutions – Nordic Council of Ministers, Nordic Council, Nordic Investment Bank, Nordic Environment Finance Corporation, etc. have contributed to the making the BSR as well. In 2000, the EU launched the so-called Northern Partnership Initiative which, from the very beginning, had a ‘Baltic window’ (joint EU-Russian projects in the BSR). A network of Euroregions which fostered cooperation between border local actors, such as regions, provinces, counties and municipalities was created in the BSR.

It should nonetheless be noted that many elements of traditional thinking still remained even on the peak of the EU-Russian cooperation in late 1990s and early

2000s. This type of thinking was premised on geopolitical and realist theories that sanctify the boundaries of the state and privilege the core in relation to the margins. According to this view, Russian national identity has been intimately bound up with the Russian state, which as such left little space for regions or an emphasis on regionality. There was, therefore, sensitivity about the status of the state's borders, which from this perspective remained seen as sites of exclusion rather than integration and cross-border cooperation. Moscow also was concerned about separatist tendencies which could arise in some Russian border regions (Kaliningrad, Karelia) as a result of intensive cross- and transborder contacts.

At the policy-making level, regional integration was not an unquestionable strategy for the Russian elites; it made sense for the Kremlin only under certain conditions. First, Russia should benefit materially from EU-sponsored projects. Second, EU programs should not interfere into the broadly understood Russia's domestic affairs. Third, the EU should not expect and insist on political changes in Russia. Fourth, sufficient space should be left for pragmatic bilateral relations with individual states (such as Germany and Finland). Fifth, Russia's Baltic neighbors won't generate what Russia is perceived as security threats.

Since Moscow was disappointed with the EU's reluctance to properly integrate the Russian north-western regions (especially Kaliningrad) in the European common socioeconomic, political and cultural space (Russia was not included to the EU Strategy for the BSR and Eastern Partnership program) as well as with increased U.S./NATO activities in the BSR (including NATO enlargement and the deployment of the elements of the U.S. ballistic missile defense system) the prospects for Baltic regionalist projects became rather uncertain even before the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis.

It should be noted, however, that the positive experiences of regional cooperation in the BSR were not consigned to oblivion in the context of Russia's current tensions with the West. As the Baltic 2030 Agenda Action Plan (June 2017) adopted by the CBSS to implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals demonstrates, the BSR community was able to develop common approaches to coping with regional challenges. The plan suggests the same arsenal of methods and tools for problem-solving, improving the situation domestically and regionally, as well as producing a forward-looking, long-term sustainable development strategy. Although the geopolitical tensions in the BSR remain strong and various countries and theoretical schools differ in their interpretation of the Baltic regionalism concept, the general dynamic in the BSR is relatively positive and gives some grounds for cautious optimism.