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Outlook on Baltic Cooperation 1945-2004

At the First Baltic Assembly the Estonian Mati Hint evoked the unity of the Baltic nations in his manifesto "the Baltic Way". The *Baltic way* soon after became known beyond the three Baltic states when approximately two million people joined their hands to form a human chain across the three Baltic states on 23 August 1989 during a peaceful political demonstration that carried the same name. In the months that followed, the popular fronts made numerous joint appeals to international organizations and foreign governments. When they had declared independence from the Soviet Union, the governments of the Baltic States were quick to renew the suspended Baltic Treaty on Unity and Cooperation signed on 12 September 1934 with an explicit reference to the "historical experience of our trilateral cooperation" and with the aim to "continue and develop political and economic cooperation among our three states".

Only a few years later, the Baltic States argued over border demarcations between their countries, fought "egg wars", "herring wars", "pork wars" and competed as to which of them would be the first to join the EU and NATO. Prominent politicians in Estonia and Lithuania no longer wanted their countries to be labelled as "Baltic", but as "Nordic" (in case of Estonia) or Central European (in case of Lithuania).

So, what had happened? Did Baltic ceased to serve as an identity anchor just within a few years? And what did this mean for cooperation among the Baltic states, which was initiated by the 1990 Treaty and further institutionalised in subsequent years?

Based on constructivist approaches in cultural studies, my presentation assumes that territorial spaces are analytical categories with context-dependent attributions. As a result of political, social or media constructions they can become spaces for planning or action - and above all are changeable. This approach makes the changes that the term Baltic has experienced operable. With regard to spatial identification processes, I assume that identity is ultimately a single category and regional identities form only one aspect of everyday identity among many.

In the interwar period, the term Baltic States was not used exclusively to refer to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and the three countries were not yet regarded as a unit. It was only after the annexation of the three countries by the Soviet Union that the term was used widely in academia and in everyday parlance. The Baltic states were united by the common experience of loss of statehood and the conviction that they belonged to a cultural area that was clearly different from the rest of the Soviet Union. This created cohesion and had an identity-building effect on the Baltic nations. The feeling of us vs them — of the Baltics vs the Soviet — promoted a "transnational Baltic regionalism" that led to the cooperation of the independence movements at the end of the 1980s.

The demonstrative alliance of the three independence movements, as well as decades of joint lobbying by exile organizations, not only led to the three Baltic republics being perceived as one regional unit abroad, but it also rose expectations in the West that the three states would

(and should) cooperate closely once they were independent again. The West had little sympathy for the Baltic States' tendency to go their own way.

A goal of my presentation is to show that substantial disagreements already started occurring during the Singing Revolution, a period often described as the "golden age of cooperation." In several cases, the actors gave clear preference to national interests. Projects such as the common market or common custom regulations were not implemented. Moreover, the often declared common destiny of the three Baltic states projected a historical, deep dimension that contrasted with the national disputes in the background, some of which were results of protocolary trivialities.

Furthermore my presentation explores the cooperation among the Baltic states in the 1990s and the different views on it in the Baltic States and in the West. It examines shortcomings and problems that occurred in the cooperation process and to what extent they can be traced back to identity issues of the three Baltic nations. Since cooperation among the three Baltic states was institutionalised much more in the post-Soviet period than during the interwar period, I will first give an overview of the Baltic cooperation structures that emerged in the 1990s, such as the Baltic Assembly, the Baltic Cooperation Council, and the Baltic Council of Ministers.

Based on examples of trilateral cooperation in security and defence policy, economic policy and transport policy, I argue the following:

- External factors, including the expectations of the Western states (which perceived the Baltic States as one region and considered cooperation among the Baltic States to be desirable), had a major influence on trilateral cooperation;
- Western expectations of trilateral cooperation sometimes failed to live up to the complexity of domestic political processes in the Baltic states;
- Assumptions about the purpose and objectives of trilateral cooperation in the West and the Baltic States were not entirely congruent;
- External actors called for cooperation and encouraged it when it served their own interests;
- Practical cooperation at the working level was enormously impeded by the simultaneous transformation and the parallel but uncoordinated process of institution building in the three states;
- Difficulties in cooperation at the practical level were by no means solely due to identity shortcomings; they had a variety of other causes;
- Criticism of the organisational structures of the cooperation was justified and contributed to its noticeable improvement;
- Provocative statements by prominent politicians (e.g. Ilves, Saudargas) about the affiliation of their countries to Scandinavia or Central Europe had no effect on practical cooperation;
- An analysis of the trilateral cooperation in the sense of "success" or "failure" is not appropriate; it should be considered at least in a sectoral and temporal differentiated manner;

- Differences of opinion are common for day-to-day political business and the much-discussed competition among the Baltic states sometimes also had positive side effects.