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This is the published version of a paper published in *Baltic Worlds In-house edition*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Petrogiannis, V., Rade, L. (2016)  
What Is It That Holds A Region Together?.  
*Baltic Worlds In-house edition*, : 5-9

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

In-house edition with ISBN 978-91-87843-44-0

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-29753>

# WHAT IS IT THAT HOLDS A REGION TOGETHER?

by **Vasileios Petrogiannis** and **Linn Rabe**

If you google the Baltic Sea region you will get 14 million hits in 0.4 seconds, revealing an organizational phenomenon. The top fifty results will be about EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region, different forms of councils and regional cooperation, university networks, partnership platforms and programs. Google will suggest narrowing the search with words such as strategy, program, and forum. Looking at the results for images, the top results will show maps in blue and green colors, program logotypes (in similar colors), photos from formal meetings, and Power-Point slides with project plans and goals. The region seems to be a well-established institution. But is this really the full picture? Is the result of our Google search an indication of a fabricated reality? To gain more insight into the structures behind the Baltic Sea region and regions per se, we asked a group of scholars linked to Södertörn University and the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEEES) who study the Baltic Sea region from different angles to inform us about their approaches.<sup>1</sup> For some of the scholars, the concept of "region" is a main characteristic and focus of their study, while for others the regional aspects follow as a consequence of the research objects they have chosen. A common dominator of all researchers in question is that they take the Baltic Sea region as the object of their studies. We asked them to share what they think "region" actually means and what constitutes the region's borders. How fixed is the concept and what can cause a region to change over time? Do different fields use the term similarly, or are there contradictions? And what contributions may regions bring to the academic discussion?

## The Baltic Sea

Even though the common dominator among this diverse group of researchers is that they are using the Baltic Sea region as case, their definitions of this region differ. In natural science the Baltic Sea region is defined as the sea itself and its surrounding drainage area. From a geographical point of view the Baltic Sea region

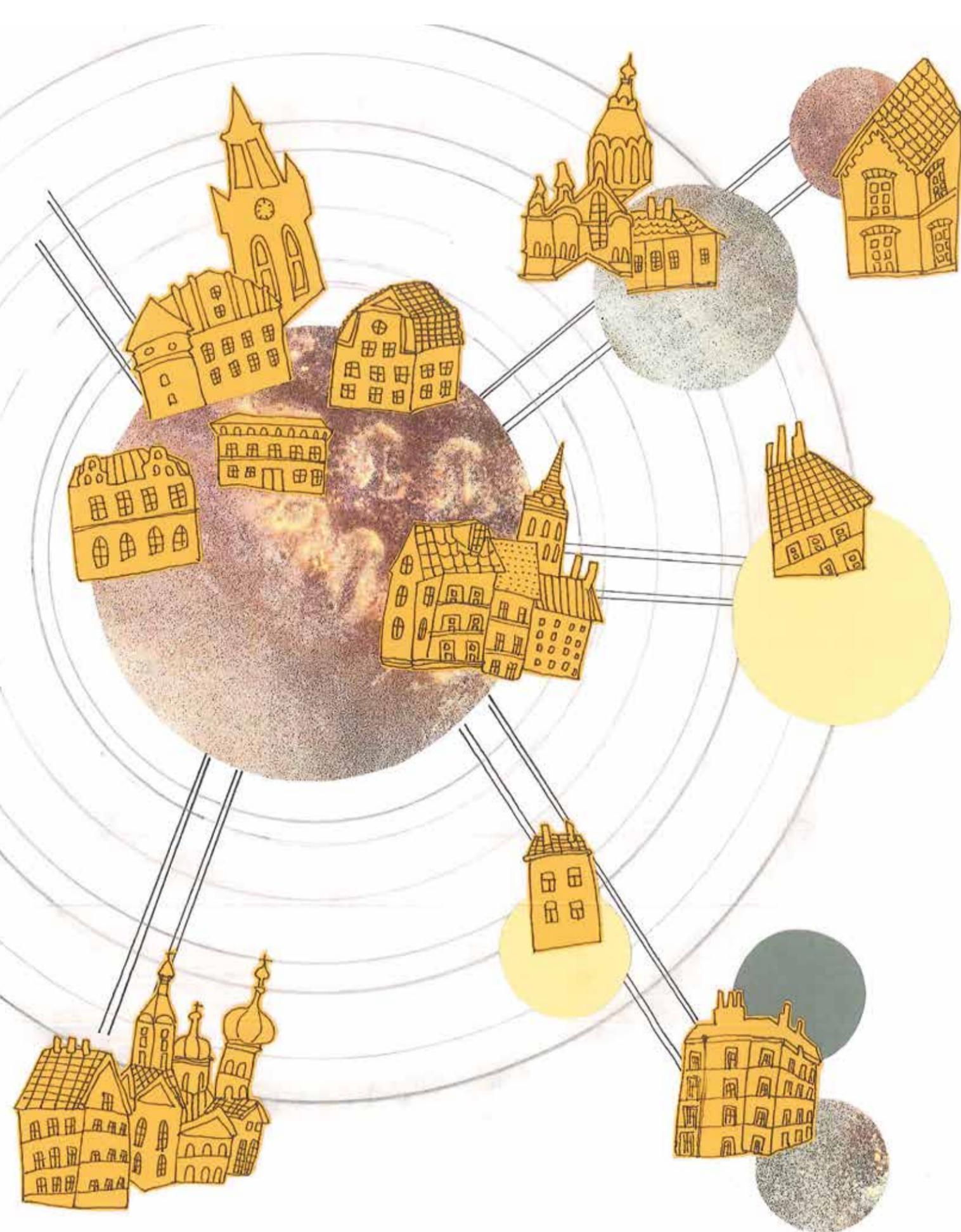
can also be seen as the physical entity, but it can likewise be seen as a sociopolitical construct around water as a means of communication. Péter Balogh explains that when naval traffic was the key means of transportation the Baltic Sea was a *connecting* element, but as inland traffic became more intense the sea instead had a divisive effect.

Charlotte Bydler, studying anthropocene effects as they are expressed through a poetics of Sápmi in the northern area of the Baltic Sea, also refers to historic trade when defining "the cosmopolitan Baltic Sea region". She confirms Balogh's presentation of the sea as a historically important means of communication, arguing its importance not only for those who lived on or near the coasts, but also for people from the interior traveling on rivers.

By arguing for a definition of regions centered on core regional values, such as cultural practices and shared language, Bydler stands for one of the broader definitions we will encounter of the region, one which includes the Norwegian Sámi as inhabitants of the Baltic Sea region.

**BUT NEITHER BALOGH** nor Bydler sees the Baltic Sea region as a thing of the past. With increased attention nowadays on environmental challenges, locally produced food, proximity, and regional awareness, the Baltic Sea has started to re-emerge as a positive or at least necessary factor of local and regional development. Balogh states: "As a geopolitical concept, the Baltic Sea Region [...] has experienced a revival to foster contacts between the formerly politically divided Baltic Rim countries. While there is no doubt that cross-border contacts have been evolving, the depth of such integration remains to be seen, and the expectations of various actors should also be realistic."

On a similar path, Marta Grzechnik discusses actors and interactions, saying that in her understanding of the term, regions in general and the Baltic Sea region in particular are cross-national units based on networks of interactions, but the exact meaning



must remain vague. This is because any definition of a region has to encompass the different meanings given to it by the actors involved, and the political and social contexts in which this happens, Grzechnik says. Her research looks for and analyzes such definitions, and the different roles and functions different actors see for themselves in the Baltic Sea region.

**MAYBE NORBERT GÖTZ** takes this argument the furthest by saying that he leaves the definition of the Baltic Sea region to (political) region-builders and confines himself to analyzing how these region-builders delimit the region in various contexts. According to him, this problem-oriented approach avoids the trap of (ideological) regional essentialism. Other researchers make similar statements. Anders Nordström and Matilda Dahl's work on the transnational practices of region-building also supports an open definition of the Baltic Sea region and basically uses the term in the same way as those organizations acting in the name of the Baltic Sea region. The researchers have chosen this open definition of region in order to capture the "stable state of instability" in the Baltic Sea region. Nordström and Dahl argue that action in the name of the "Baltic Sea region" creates a type of organized social order and that the notion of the region is used to coordinate transnational action, in which the boundaries and applicable rules remain fluid, however. One of Nordström and Dahl's examples is the EU Baltic Sea strategy in which "the region" is actually the actors who conduct specific regional actions.

Nordström and Dahl were puzzled by the picture in regionalization literature which views the Baltic Sea region as lacking a strong regional identity and thus deficient in "regionness" while at the same time being one of the regions with the most regional organizations and transnational action in the EU that is even presented as a role model for regional management. Rebecka Lettevall identifies the region's position in the European Union as part of successful regional branding, since the process of forming regions makes the regions exist in a visible, formal way. Lettevall says the term "Baltic Sea" is difficult to use in communication as many native English speakers assume that it refers to the three Baltic States only, but through the European Union the Baltic Sea region as a brand has been established quite firmly along with some other regions. However, one must not forget that a region also is something that exists beyond political and economic decisions. Just as the European Union is not identical with Europe, the EU definition of the Baltic Sea region is not enough to cover and explain what it is, Lettevall says.

### What is a region?

So the Baltic Sea region is not easily defined. Will a more general discussion about regions supply more insights?

The most straightforward answer we get when asking what a region is states that a region is defined as a geographically limited area. However, delimiting this area offers some challenges for individual researchers, regardless of expertise.

For example, drawing from his own and Mathilda Dahl's work, Anders Nordström says that a region is a basic concept used to define something that is both less and more than the units that it is formed from. A region is always defined in relation to something bigger and something smaller. Also relating regions to scale, Norbert Götz says that a region is a subcategory of a greater territorial area, a subcategory with more (or less) overlapping and frequently contested commonalities that either fade out at the edges or are defined by a border line. He contrasts the region to the nation, saying nations are conventionally not addressed as regions, although they would qualify as regions of larger areas under the above definition. Often there is a connection made between regions and countries, which is unfortunate according to Rebecka Lettevall as the concept permits to much more. She found "region" to be a complicated concept to discuss as it is often linked to geography, to some extent necessarily, although she prefers to see it as a political concept.

**FROM AN ADMINISTRATIVE** perspective regions are often defined from above. For example, the idea of regions has lately been intensified through the European Union. The Baltic Sea region has been branded more firmly through the EU initiative, making it more visible internationally as a region. The EU branding can be defined as a top-down approach to regionalization; many of the examples given in this text are driven more or less from the top down, but regions can also be identified from the

bottom up as Charlotte Bydler's does in regard to Sápmi. Bydler argues that regions are characterized by a shared relationship to territory or topography as well as shared language, costumes, political or economic conditions, and administration – or the historical traces of these factors, as in the example of Sápmi or the Baltic States, which share a common history of Soviet governance.

Despite the struggle to pinpoint exactly what a region is, most of our respondents argue that any definition of the term other than the definition they have chosen to use would not have been possible without changing the objective and nature of the research altogether. For example, Nordström claims that a stricter or more limited definition of the concept would restrict the researcher's scope of interest, and that a different definition would force the scholars to rephrase the questions, ultimately resulting in different answers. Monica Hammer highlights the fact that, when it comes to applied science, it is crucial to match the delimitation of the region with the problem to be analyzed. She gives ecosystem management as an example, saying that it becomes problematic to deal with water quality problems in the Baltic Sea, for example, if one defines the region as the Baltic coastal states, or even just the Baltic Sea itself, and not the drainage basin. From a water management perspective it is more suitable to consider the whole drainage basin, since sooner or later the Baltic Sea will be affected by pollutants, nutrient leakage, or other human activities in the entire drainage basin. Being able

to address whole ecosystems in management policy is one of the practical advantages of the European Union's notion of regions, Hammer says.

### What holds a region together?

Most of the scholars follow the constructivist approach in relation to the cohesion of a region. It seems that the factors and actors that initiate and fulfil the creation of a region are those that hold the region together. Identity is a crucial element for the consistency and continuity of a region and obviously this identity must be common and shared among the inhabitants of a region or among the actors that propose and support the existence of a specific region. There is, however, a difference between identity-based and interest-based approaches that our selection of researchers may perceive rather differently. Sápmi (referring both to the Sami homeland, traditional lands and the Sami people) is a characteristic example of how a cross-border region is held together through a shared identity and culture. Charlotte Bydler, working in the field of Sami research, recognizes that the Sami, as a minority and indigenous people, are increasingly facing competing claims and resource extraction activities by state and multinational corporations on Sami traditional lands and shows how cultural identity plays an important role in gaining recognition for Sami cultural and land rights. The Sápmi territory is a good example of how a region can be held together by the inhabitants' identity and interest, she argues, as the region has met most of the imaginable types of resistance: forced demographic change, economic, political, educational, and religious pressure, and nowadays bureaucratic pressure from nation-states.

**THE CONSTRUCTION** and imposed connectivity of a region can be seen in the Baltic Sea region which has been an area where different actors have tried to establish a solid region with its own identity. Norbert Götz challenges the link between interest and identity and argues that while identities may be built around interests, that does not have to be the case. He distances himself from an identity-based approach in arguing that "a balanced constructivist approach to regions is most fruitful, an approach that neither requests nor is limited to any natural preconditions or (political) institutionalization on the one hand, nor demands the existence of a regional identity on the other."

### Fluidity or stability?

There is a consensus among our respondents regarding how static regions are. Regions are characterized by fluidity rather than stability, regardless of whether the discussion is about human or earth history. Time, which one could say is the synonym of history, is a dimension that defines the stability of a region.

Norbert Götz stresses the necessity of some stability "in order to make regions meaningful products of human imagination", while at the same time regions may be "fuzzy, depending on more or less overlapping definitions". Even the geological regions are not static in a "long time perspective", as Elinor Andrén and Thomas Andrén state, regardless of how static

## Researchers interviewed for this essay:

**ELINOR ANDRÉN**, Associate Professor of Physical Geography. Ongoing projects include *UPPBASER – Understanding Past and Present Baltic Sea Ecosystem Response – background for a sustainable future*.



**THOMAS ANDRÉN**, Associate Professor of Marine Quaternary Geology. Ongoing projects include *IODP Baltic Sea Expedition 347: History of the Baltic Sea Basin during the Last 130,000 Years*.



**PÉTER BALOGH**, Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute for Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. As a former CBEES affiliate, he defended his doctoral thesis *Perpetual borders: German-Polish cross-border contacts in the Szczecin area* in 2014. He is now researching national narratives and macro-regional images in Hungary and beyond.



**CHARLOTTE BYDLER**, Associate Professor of Art History (former research leader at CBEES). Project leader of the multi-disciplinary project *A New Region of the World? Towards a Poetics of Situatedness* with Monica Hammer and others.



**MARTA GRZECHNIK**, Assistant Professor at the Chair of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Gdańsk. Former CBEES colleague. Latest book: Marta Grzechnik and Heta Hurskainen (eds.), *Beyond the Sea: Reviewing the Manifold Dimensions of Water as Barrier and Bridge* (Böhlau Verlag 2015).



they may look to human beings with a much shorter historical perspective. The Baltic Sea region is no exception. As a human construction or product of human imagination, the Baltic Sea region has been in constant flux. Marta Grzechnik illustrates this by saying that the Baltic Sea region meant something different for an activist of the Polish Baltic Institute in the 1930s, the organizers and participants of the 1937 Riga conference of Baltic historians, the proponents of the 1970s Soviet idea of the “Sea of Peace”, the 1990s enthusiasts of Baltic Sea regional integration in Scandinavia and Germany, and so on, while the EU is the main actor nowadays in creating and deciding the profile of Baltic Sea as a region. However, there is a common history of interaction among people who live beside the shores of the sea and beyond. In a way, Rebecka Lettevall says a shared history holds the region together, but at the same time it may be this shared history that tears the region apart. Historical events become parts of different narratives, and these narratives give different emphases to the same historical events. Only the Nordic region, which one could argue is a subregion of the Baltic Sea, has been relatively static in the past 60 years, according to Norbert Götz, “mainly depending on the maintenance of its association with the territory represented by the members of the Nordic Council”. In contrast, organizations dealing with the Baltic Sea region, such as the environmental agency HELCOM and the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), vary in membership, the latter having been enlarged to include counter-intuitive cases such as Iceland.

**MOST OF OUR RESPONDENTS** argue that human interaction and imagination are the main factors defining the boundaries of a region and that the making of these boundaries may change over time. This means that, again, there is nothing essentialist in our effort to understand how and why the boundaries of a region have been defined in a certain way. Since human imagination is not something that all the human beings, societies, states, or different actors share in the same way, each definition of a region fixes the boundaries in its own way. In the era of nation-states the boundaries of regions are associated with or match the outer borders of the states in their periphery. In other words, a region ends where the national borders of the states that form its periphery also end. So it is these national borders that define the boundaries of the region. Anders Nordström and Matilda Dahl also refer to the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of the members (states) that participate in a region, saying, as “the clearer the membership status, the stronger the boundaries can be, and so if the status of membership is unclear, the boundaries of the region can be more flexible”. The process of inclusion and exclusion of different states or different subregions can also be found in the case of the Baltic Sea. For example, Marta Grzechnik mentions the Polish Baltic Institute’s English-language journal, *Baltic and Scandinavian Countries*, which excluded Germany and the USSR as not being “predominantly Baltic in their orientation” in its definition of the Baltic Sea region in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

## Regions and the nation

Regional and area studies challenge the hegemonic position of the nation-state as an analytical and methodological tool. This is an opinion shared by all the scholars and it is clearly stated in most answers. Norbert Götz points out that regions can work as a remedy for methodological nationalism as he emphasizes “significant – and traditionally underestimated – dimensions of human agency, above, below, and beyond the level of nation states”. Anders Nordström and Mathilda Dahl very aptly mention that regions can be seen “as states or substates ‘in the making’” and that the theoretical and methodological contribution of the regional approach is that it enables research to “find some other concepts to capture the ‘in-between’ status of regions and regional action that does not compete with state-run governance”. The hegemony of the nation-state as an analytical tool is recognized by Charlotte Bydler, who gives a regional dimension to this hegemony as she states that “the national paradigm dominates in the northern hemisphere and especially in Europe”. Hence, trying to avoid the reef of methodological nationalism is a challenge that all researchers confront.

Marta Grzechnik is very clear on this issue: “the national bias in our education is something that we, as researchers, need to overcome”. She further mentions some practical challenges that regional studies needs to deal with, such as “access to sources in different languages composed in different traditions of scholarship”. Furthermore, Péter Balogh points out some other challenges that regional studies bear, as for example the territorial trap or regional essentialism, and the risk of reproducing political constructs in academia.

## Multidisciplinary approaches

Finally, many of the scholars discuss multidisciplinary approaches as a great opportunity when studying regions. Anders Nordström highlights multidisciplinary region research, not least in relation to his and Matilda Dahl’s experience in their own research: “The advantage of research on regions are that it is open to many approaches. It is our experience that most regional research prides itself on being multidisciplinary. Our project grew out of collaboration between researchers from political science, language studies, and business administration. We believe the studies of regional phenomena are a good basis for multi-disciplinary research”. Elinor Andrén and Thomas Andrén also salute the opportunity (and challenge) in the prospect of working together with colleagues from all nine countries facing the Baltic Sea. They end by summarizing that it excites them to know that “the Baltic Sea can play a part in knowledge-building relating to climate history in the longterm perspective and that [their] findings not only supply information towards governing the Baltic Sea in the best way, but also promote our understanding of how semienclosed seas respond to external pressures in general.”

The respondents whose information contributed to this text agree on the conclusion that the understanding of regions differs

in the various research fields. To make a generalization based on how our respondents approach the concept, one can say that human geographers try to detach the research on regions from nation-states and focus on a more nuanced notion of territories, including the flows and networks associated with them; political scientists examine how different regions have been politically institutionalized; historians look back to the past to understand the evolution of regions; and geologists view regions in a different way, as the time scale of natural history, measured in hundreds of thousands of years, is disproportionately to that of human history.

Yet what unifies the discussion is that the notion of region is conceptually indefinite; it is difficult to fix in one position. In the postmodern era of globalization, where the nation-state is losing its power and meaning while at the same time trying to resist this, regions gain a specific significance, as both a theoretical and a methodological tool, in how we understand the world. For this reason, region-related research and the discussion of it by scholars affiliated with Södertörn University and the Centre for Baltic and Eastern European studies for example not only contributes to scientific knowledge and the academic community, but has great relevance for society in general and for our better understanding of the always complicated and interconnected world at large. ✕

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Linn Rabe, PhD student at the Baltic and East European Graduate School (BEEGS) in environmental studies. Her thesis explores the links between procedural justice and legitimacy in local implementation of nature conservation in a multilevel governance context, the Baltic Sea macroregion is as a case study.



## references

- 1 The selection of researchers involved in this article is intended to reflect a broad spectrum of different fields and research traditions. The questioning of the scholars involved was carried out in two phases. A questionnaire with eleven qualitative questions on the use of the “region” concept and the use of the Baltic Sea region in the given scholar’s research was sent to the invited scholars. The authors of the present article combined the findings in a first version which was reviewed and commented on by the scholars in order to get a dynamic view on the matter.
- 2 “Editorial Policy” in: *Baltic and Scandinavian Countries. A Survey of the Peoples and States on the Baltic with Special Regard to Their History, Geography and Economics*, 4 no. 3 (1938).

## Researchers interviewed for this essay – continued:

**NORBERT GÖTZ**, Professor at the Institute of Contemporary History. Ongoing projects include *Spaces of Expectation: Mental Mapping and Historical Imagination in the Baltic Sea and Mediterranean Regions*.



**MONICA HAMMER**, Associate Professor of Nature Resource Management. Former research leader at CBEES. Ongoing projects include “ECOPOOL”.



**REBECCA LETTEVALL**, Associate Professor of the History of Ideas and director of the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES). Ongoing projects include *East of Cosmopolis: The world Citizen and the Paradoxes of the Sans-papiers*.



**ANDERS NORDSTRÖM**, Doctor of Political Science, former BEEGS graduate. Working together with Matilda Dahl (former BEEGS graduate) on the transnational practices of region-building in the Baltic Sea region.

