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, partner ship 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 PowerPoint 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 (CBEES) who study the Baltic Sea region from different angles to inform us about their approaches. 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 denominator 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 denominator 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.

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 analyses 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) regions themselves and combines this approach with an analysis of 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 Mathilda 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 region-builders who act 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 where the Baltic region is lacking a strong regional identity and thus deficient in “regioneness” 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. Rebecca Lett­vall identifies the region’s position in the European Union as part of a top-down approach to regionalization, 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 region-building is characterized by a shared relationship to territory or topography as well as shared language, costumes, political or economic conditions, and administration – or the historical development 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 the region-building efforts in the Baltic Sea region are based on a strong regional identity. Norbert Götz stresses the necessity of some stability “in the order of the region” and the necessity of region-building to delimit the region in various contexts. But, when it comes to applied science, it is crucial to match the delimitation of the region with the problem to be analyzed. The 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 the Baltic Sea, and not the whole 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 EU’s region-building, Hammer says.

What holds a region together? More detailed problem-oriented constructivist approach in relation to the cohesion of a region. It seems that the factors and actors that initiate and fulfill the creation of a region are those that hold the region together. Identity is a crucial element for the construction of a region. As a regional entity 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 regions 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 increas­ ingly 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 Sami 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 regions have tried to establish a solid integrative structure or region. Identity. Norbert Götz challenges the link between identity and interest and argues that while identities may be built around interests, that does not have to be the case. He distances himself from identity-based approach in arguing that “a shared identity is one that the other than the definition they have chosen to use would not have been possible without changing the objective and nature of the research. For example, Nordic identity 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 Sami 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.

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 processes. 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 define 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 Andréns and Thomas Andréns state, regardless of how static

The Baltic Sea region is a part of the EU strategy.
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 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 besides 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 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 Gótz, “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 islands.

Marta Grzechnik says in this context: “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 scholarly research”. Furthermore, Péter Balogh points out some other challenges that “the national paradigm dominates in research and education in the Nordic region, says Charlotte Bydler, who gives a regional dimension to this hegemony as she states that “the national paradigms 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.

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 is that it is open to many approaches. It is our experience that most region-related 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. Theorists Andrén and and Marta Grzechnik emphasise the importance of knowledge 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 questionnaire 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 former.


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