Heft 5 | 26. Jahrgang | 2016

comparativ

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR GLOBALGESCHICHTE UND VERGLEICHENDE GESELLSCHAFTSFORSCHUNG

Rolf Petri (ed.)

The Baltic Sea: A Space of Changing Expectations

Leipziger Universitätsverlag

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Comparativ.
Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung / hrsg. von Matthias Middell und Hannes Siegrist – Leipzig: Leipziger Univ.-Verl.
ISSN 0940-3566
Jg. 26, H. 5. The Baltic Sea: A Space of Changing Expectations. – 2016

The Baltic Sea: A Space of Changing Expectations. Ed. by Rolf Petri –
Leipzig: Leipziger Univ.-Verl., 2016
(Comparativ; Jg. 26, H. 5)
ISBN 978-3-96023-111-0

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Comparativ.
Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung 26 (2016) 5
ISSN 0940-3566
ISBN 978-3-96023-111-0

Region Building Around the Baltic Sea, 1989–2016: Expectations and Disenchantment

Rolf Petri

ABSTRACT

Nach 1989 wurden hohe Erwartungen in die Neubegründung des Ostseeraums als Geschichtsregion gesetzt. Den Bürgern der Anrainerstaaten sollten damit neue Möglichkeiten geboten werden, sich mit übernationalen politischen Prozessen und dem ungehinderten Austausch über alle Grenzen hinweg zu identifizieren. Die hier versammelten Beiträge würdigen die durch die EU-Erweiterung erzielten Ergebnisse, ziehen jedoch hinsichtlich der anvisierten Etablierung einer „Ostseeregion" eine eher ernüchternde Bilanz. Teils im Vergleich mit dem Mittelmeerraum werden die Strukturpolitik für Inseln, die Bemühungen um Demokratisierung der transnationalen Politik, die intellektuellen Anstrengungen zur Verankerung der Großregion sowie deren Wahrnehmung durch Migranten untersucht. Dabei zeigt sich, dass nationale Interessen und Erwartungshorizonte sowie ältere Raumvorstellungen der Etablierung einer „Ostseeregion" bisher entgegenstehen.

In *Futures Past*, Reinhardt Koselleck argued that it is meaningful to represent past experience through the expression "space of experience" since it merges different layers of time into a whole. He went on arguing that it might be better not to speak of "space of expectation," because expected futures form only a horizon; the new space which will open behind that line cannot yet be seen.[1] When naming our research project *Spaces of Expectation*,[2] we disregarded this recommendation. In the imaginative geography of the

1 R. Koselleck, Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time [1979], New York 2004, pp. 260–261.

2 The Spaces of Expectation Project (https://spacesofexpectation.wordpress.com/) is located at the intersection of contemporary history and political science. It is funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Stu-

Mediterranean and Baltic Seas, which is the subject of our enquiry, experience and expectation, although "not symmetrical,"[3] are so tightly interrelated to represent reciprocal preconditions. Attempts for region building, like those examined in the following pages, usually start from reinventing their space object in terms of a "historical region." They suggest that the better future they envisage can be achieved by reunifying spaces which in the past belonged to each other, before they were drawn apart by some artifice, for example an "iron curtain." In the following pages we will not go deep into the conceptual deconstruction of historical narratives related to the Baltic Sea;[4] rather, we shall focus on the gratification or disillusionment of expectations that such narratives helped creating. The contributions to the panel "Maritime Areas: Spaces of Changing Expectations" of the 2016 European Social Science History Conference in Valencia form the corpus of the present issue. José Damião Rodrigues's paper was also presented on the same occasion, where it stimulated a vivid debate on the Mediterranean's role for European projections toward oceanic spaces and modernity. It has been placed in the Forum to reinforce the geographical and chronological homogeneity of the monographic section. All contributions of this section will focus on the Baltic Sea area in the post-1989 period; two of them will also look at the Mediterranean for comparison.

I.

In her article, Deborah Paci adopts such a comparative view to analyze the European Union's policies in favour of Mediterranean and Baltic islands. After commenting on the parallel developments of EU regional policies and of academic Island Studies, she looks at the B7 Baltic Islands Network and IMEDOC in the Mediterranean. According to what was determined by the Amsterdam Treaty, islands suffer from structural disadvantages that depend on their geographic position. Brussels' action is directed to improve the connection of insular areas to the mainland, expecting that such improvement might help diminishing the disparities in economic development. While this approach translates "island" with "isolation," the alternative paradigm elaborated by recent Island Studies[5] underlines the connectivity of islands. To turn the latter into a comparative advantage, the islands' relations should be developed in multiple directions and be island-centred and sea-oriented and not only mainland-oriented. The author explains that this view comes close to the approach adopted by the Baltic Sea islands' political representa-

dies/Östersjöstiftelsen, Stockholm. Based at Södertörn University Stockholm, it is run in cooperation with Ca' Foscari University Venice. We thank Östersjöstiftelsen and the project partners for their support.

3 Koselleck, Futures Past, p. 259.

4 See, among others, the pioneering pages by B. Stråth, The Baltic as Image and Illusion: The Construction of a Region between Europe and the Nation, in: B. Stråth (ed.), Myth and Memory in the Construction of Community, Bruxelles 2000, pp. 199–214; see also M. Grzechnik, Making Use of the Past: The Role of Historians in the Baltic Sea Region Building, in: Journal of Baltic Studies 43 (2012) 3, pp. 329–343.

5 G. Baldacchino, The Coming Age of Island Studies, in: Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie 95 (2004) 3, pp. 272–283.

tives, some of whom recently expressed a certain disillusionment over the "continental" approach adopted by the EU. They perceive Brussels as being less interested than it was before the EU enlargement in sustaining a self-governed Baltic island world.[6] Mediterranean islands' representatives seem comfortable instead with the EU's insularity dogma, as long as dramatizing the disadvantages of isolation helps them obtaining the Structural Funds' support. A rhetoric of "Mediterranean-ness" frequently accompanies their claims for reparative assistance from a European Union otherwise seen as unfairly northern-biased. As divergent as they are, both tendencies express a growing distance between regional expectations and the European level of identification.
Along with soothing or mounting international tensions and migration flows, the EU's Mediterranean policies have continued to go back and forth between inclusive and exclusive approaches; also the media representations oscillated between the connective-bridge and the protective-moat metaphors.[7] By comparison, the post-communist reconstruction of the Baltic Sea as a "European inland sea" seemed to be an easier and more rewarding objective for regional policies. Where structural forces of cohesion would not suffice, a discursive construction of the region would do the rest, many politicians and scholars thought. Almost thirty years later, Marta Grzechnik and Jussi Kurunmäki take stock of these efforts in a more disenchanted way.

II.

As Marta Grzechnik points out, in the early days of post-communist euphoria the Baltic Sea region became the object of a region-making effort that favoured border-defying categories and practices. Not only economic relations, inter-state cooperation and transnational political initiatives took part in this effort, also academic institutions and single scholars engaged in region-building, for example by offering the narrative of a "common history" to shape a new sense of regional belonging. As the author argues, in the world of research institutes and scholarly networks a European Baltic Sea region came actually into existence. Yet, it has remained a limited phenomenon. The ideas it was based on were mainly of German, Scandinavian and other western origins. They had scarce penetration in Poland and the Baltic States, where alternative concepts of cooperation emerged in updated versions of proposals that originated from the inter-war and communist periods. From the latter's stronger nation-centred perspectives, the Baltic Sea area was envisioned as a texture of interstate-relations and not a playground of transnational governance. Older imaginative geographies of transnational regions, which persist in the European mind were also at odds with the EU-ropean re-bordering effort. This holds, for example, for the centuries–old west–east divide that instead of permitting to simply

6 See the comprehensive analysis by S.M. Edquist and J. Holmén, Islands of Identity. History-Writing and Identity Formation in Five Island Regions in the Baltic Sea, Huddinge 2015.

7 R. Petri, The Mediterranean Metaphor in Early Geopolitical Writings, in: History. The Journal of the Historical Association 101 (2016) 348, pp. 671-691.

remove and forget the "iron curtain," transformed it into a sort of phantom border or "unspecifiable barrier."[8] The gradual fading of the initial euphoria was therefore not only the result of a history that took paths which had not been foreseen, but also of plural regionalisms that were present right from the start, but the plurality of which was initially overshadowed by the hegemony of western European discourse.

Since 1991, political decision-makers and academic advisors assigned to the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference a major role as a promoter of transnational democracy. The BSPC experiment was seen as a catalyst that could help overcoming the democratic deficits of supranational decision-making. The participants also expected that it's activities would contribute to the shaping of a regional civil society, public opinion, and identity. Jussi Kurunmäki dissects this experience, and makes it a test case for theories of transnational democracy that were predicting the retreat of the nation-state in the era of globalization. Observing the rhetoric used by the Parliamentary Conference members over a quarter of century, the author highlights that the political process took not exactly the expected direction. The EU enlargement risked to transform the BSPC de facto into a component of the Union's multi-level governance framework, which was hard to conceal not only with the external viewpoint of BSCP member Russia, but also with the ideal type of parliamentarian institutions. Overall, BSCP members tended to privilege in their rhetoric the interests of their national constituencies, and represent the state of belonging as if the assembly were a diplomatic arena. Actual regional cooperation was not driven by the deliberations of a transnational representative body, but continued to be governed by nation–state logics. Not only remained the BSCP's contribution to region building modest, it also delivered little evidence for theories of transnational democracy. As Kurunmäki notes, it is for the very reason of its deviation from the theoretical model that the Conference after all may be considered a useful arena where national parliament representatives can meet and interact to preserve peace and cooperation in the region.

Both Grzechnik's and Kurunmäki's analyses confirm that after the EU and NATO enlargement the regionalist activism lost momentum on the northern and western shores of the Baltic Sea, while the Baltic states and Poland had always privileged nation-building over region-building. They corroborate the general picture that Norbert Götz has recently drawn of post-1989 spatial politics in the Baltic Sea, underlining their incompleteness, persistent ambiguity and partial failure.[9] Not that there were no efforts made to establish the region; nor were these efforts destitute of results in terms of increasing wealth and progressing integration. Yet, they also deluded many of the original expectations. In 1989's immediate aftermath a variety of competing or intersecting space-political initiatives emerged. They were promoted by different political stakeholders who represented heterogeneous social and national interests. The already mentioned BSPC, the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the EU InterReg programs for the Baltic Sea, the spatial planning network Visions and Strategies Around the Baltic Sea (VASAB) and the visions

8 L. Wolff, Mental Mapping and Eastern Europe. 12th Södertörn Lecture, Stockholm 2016, p. 44.

9 N. Götz, Spatial Politics & Fuzzy Regionalism, in: Baltic Worlds 9 (2016) 3–4, pp. 55-67.

of North European and Baltic Sea Integration (NEBI) generated spaces of expectation that differed from each other, and from those created during the 1945–89 period, such as the Helsinki Commission and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). As a result, the "fuzzy regionalism" produced a plurality of Baltic Sea regions the inland and sea borders of which diverged. Some of the supranational institutions stretch the "Baltic Sea" geography towards the North Atlantic, including Norway, Iceland, the Faeroes, Greenland, Hamburg, and Bremen.

It is easy to infer that a similar tangle of borders, networks and imaginative geographies is a result of diverging economic and political interests. On the one hand, the EU enlargement of 1995–2004 produced a new strategy for a more intensively integrated "EU Baltic Sea region," which rather successfully delivered tangible results in terms of economy and integration. On the other, the attempt to make of the Baltic Sea a EU-ropean instead of a European "inland sea" contributed to the crisis of CBSS and BSPC and to growing tensions with Russia.[10] Bo Stråth observed that towards the end of the 1990s, when "it had become clear that Russia was not following the standard development model of economic and sociological theory, the borderline between Us and the Other began to look insurmountable, and the expectation that it could be transcended through networks and market arrangements vanished."[11] To make of the Russian adjustment to western standards a precondition of regional cooperation would make the process depending on ideological issues. It has been critically noted that the post-1989 EU politics of "openness" in the Baltic Sea area was open only to an imagined "European Us" the border of which was stretched eastwards.[12] In my opinion the risk of ideology driven approaches is that the Baltic Sea area might relapse even behind earlier forms of *realpolitik*-guided cooperation. During the "cold war," cooperation was modest in its cultural and political scope, but comprehensive enough on the diplomatic and technical levels to guarantee both sides a minimum standard of collective security. As Götz adds, the present situation bears some difficulty even for the EU Baltic Sea region itself: "Leaving out the enclave of Kaliningrad and the other westernmost parts of Russia asserts a territorial shape with blind spots that have the potential to disrupt EU efforts. The Baltic Sea region in its EU version is thus a torso with its head disconnected in Brussels and some limbs cut off." [13]

III.

The aftermath of the 2008 crisis damaged the image of the EU as an integrated political and economic space. The debates on debt and austerity reanimated the exchange of stereotypical allegations between northern and southern Europe. The heated "Grexit" and "Brexit" referendum campaigns of 2015–16, along with recent electoral results in

10 Götz, Spatial Politics, p. 62.
11 Stråth, The Baltic as Image, pp. 203–204.
12 P. Aalto, European Union and the Making of a Wider Northern Europe, London / New York 2006, p. 24.
13 Götz, Spatial Politics, p. 63.

various member states exposed the growing estrangement between the EU's political leaderships and their national constituencies. Electoral decisions challenge transnational arrangements that the political leaders long since had declared irreversible. Against this background it is of interest to learn how the spatial imagination of "ordinary people" reacts to the region building efforts we are dealing with here.
One of the most debated issues is immigration. After 2008, increasing unemployment in several EU countries triggered new waves of spatial mobility creating a fresh generation of intra-European immigrants. Southern Europe and the three Baltic states have appreciably contributed to the phenomenon. In his article, Vasileios Petrogiannis reassumes the results of interviews he conducted with migrants from Greece and Latvia in Sweden. His aim is to understand how European citizenship affects their lives and how efficiently identity politics manages to establish national, regional and European spaces of expectation in their mind. The interviews show that national belonging remains the foremost level of self-identification. Notwithstanding a persistent feeling of exclusion from the hosting society, belonging to "Europe," that is, the EU, is another important dimension of the Greek and Latvian migrants' self-definition, if for no other reason than granting them access to a degree of legal protection negated to extra-EU migrants. For Latvian migrants the "Baltic region" of origin comprises only the three Baltic states, whereas their idea of a Baltic Sea region tends to refer to Eastern European spaces from which the Scandinavian countries and Germany remain excluded. Greek migrants prefer to mention the Balkan peninsula as their home region, while they concede their belonging to the Mediterranean only on the condition that the diversity of non-European Mediterranean countries is clearly marked out. The perception of the Baltic and Mediterranean sea regions as unitary spaces, to which the region-building efforts are directed, remains almost absent from their imaginary.

IV.

During the 1980s, key texts by Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson and others introduced terms such as "invented traditions" and "nation building" into the scholarly debate. They underlined the invented character of "nation," a concept that previously used to be seen as a self-evident manifestation of a quasi-natural historical necessity. At a certain point political and military circles must have intercepted the constructivist concepts. "Nation building" popped up in the press briefings even of western occupying forces in the wake of successful "nation deconstruction" in countries such as Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. Fortunately, the post-1989 developments in the Baltic Sea area remained peaceful and undramatic. Not only, cross-border and cross-sea cooperation deepened, economic exchange and wealth grew, and the "EU Baltic Sea region" achieved an unprecedented degree of integration. Notwithstanding its partial success, the transnational region struggles to emerge as a "historical region" capable of drawing

new horizons of expectation, while "past politics are still at their strongest within a national framework."[14]

If we reject the idea that the nation is naturally given and as such immune against whatsoever competing narratives, then we should wonder why transnational visions, which took names such as New Hansa, Baltoscandia, Baltic Sea Region and so on, missed to attract the interest of those whom they meant to address and represent. This is even more striking as it is "always possible to find some link, some pre-history, which can be used to justify the inclusion of a certain actor in a certain region."[15] I believe that the texts presented in this monographic section offer some interesting, if necessarily partial, responses to the question why none of the narratives developed traction enough to replace pre-existing representations with a new regional paradigm. It looks as if the unpredictable contingency of change would conspire with the weight of long-term semantic, political and social structures of space to oppose resistance to its wilfully planned reshaping.

When Ole Wæver maintained that a new regional space of political and economic action had already been successfully implemented in the regional stakeholders' minds, the eastward EU and NATO expansion, the growing tensions with Russia and the 2008 economic crisis were still years ahead. The author nevertheless was prudent enough to underline that economic problems or security questions "might cause a rupture ending the Baltic venture."[16] So far, the Baltic Sea region, whatever and wherever it is, or was, did not succumb to a violent rupture. Rather, it seems dimmed and slowly fading away from wide-spread spatial imagination, provided that it had ever managed to penetrate it to an appreciable extent.

It remains nevertheless remarkable the degree to which political and scholarly enthusiasm for Baltic Sea "region building" converged. Given its setbacks and partial failures, we may conclude that it was of no great help for the achievement of the political goals that the "scholarly discussion about networks and regionalisation went hand in glove with the political vision."[17] That historians, geographers and political scientists granted such visions scholarly legitimacy was of no great help to academic research either. Constructivism, in fact, "becomes a critical force only when exercised from a rigid academic standpoint without prescriptive investment in the region-building enterprise itself."[18] This epistemological credo inspires the following pages, and the research effort of *Spaces of Expectation* as a whole.

14 J. Hackmann, History and politics in North Eastern Europe, in: D.J. Smith and M. Lehti (eds.), Post-Cold War Identity Politics: Northern and Baltic Experiences, London 2003, pp. 78-100, at 93.

15 I.B. Neumann, A Region-Building Approach to Northern Europe, in: Review of International Studies 20 (1994), pp. 53–75, at 73.

16 O. Wæver, The Baltic Sea: A Region after Post-Modernity?, in P. Joenniemi (ed.), Neo-Nationalism or Regionality: The Restructuring of Political Space Around the Baltic Rim, Stockholm 1997, pp. 293–342, at 306.

17 Stråth, The Baltic as Image, pp. 203–204.

18 Götz, Spatial Politics, p. 56.