Baltic Sea Region-Building: Impossibility to Have or Inability to Finish?

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by the re-establishment of each Baltic state’s independence and the Baltic Sea region (BSR) entered a new stage of development marked by efforts to replace dividing lines with a new pattern of cooperation. Thus, the BSR is a recent project in region building among several that mushroomed in the area—such as the Barents Euro-Arctic Region (BEAR) and the Northern Dimension Initiative (NDI)—that aimed to erase distinctions made during the Cold War era.

Europe's security environment has changed considerably over the past twenty-five years. Likewise, cooperation in the BSR also experienced complex economic and political transitions as it underwent several stages of development. The BSR did not become the new region its creators envisioned: a region where common problems are solved together and bottom-up transnationalism flourishes. Instead, the BSR states are divided by differing security perceptions and foreign policy goals. Yet, the original hopes for the BSR linger, despite a lack of leadership. Without clear direction, the region's development may need to wait for better times.

In 2014 and 2015, discrepancies among the security perceptions of the BSR shore states intensified. Because of Russia’s adverse actions in the neighbourhood, it became obvious that any cooperative endeavours with Russia were inconceivable for the majority of the region's actors. Yet, Russia is difficult for actors in the region to ignore, both because Russia constitutes part of the BSR's official definitions, and because Russia is an important player in the region.

Therefore, we ask: How is further development of the BSR possible when one of its significant players is both troublesome and perceived as not worth cooperating with? What kind of regional initiatives are plausible when substantial power asymmetries exist? In this chapter, we explore the conditions stalling the Baltic Sea regionalisation process—both theoretically and empirically—and discover useful analytical tools for conceptualizing this process. This chapter aims to demonstrate that though a region-building perspective explains the failure of regionalism, it still limits an understanding developments of the BSR at the end of 2015, when the region was consumed with the lack of trust among several of its members. Also, this chapter will present the suture concept as useful tool for reconceptualising the BSR.

Our arguments regarding regional building difficulties in the BSR are presented in five steps. First, we analyse how ideas about regional security cooperation have evolved in the BSR since the early 1990s, both theoretically (in the first section) and empirically (in the second section). Next, we reveal two tensions impacting the BSR's regionalisation process: Russia's attitude towards the BSR (the third section) and Lithuania's security discourse in 2014 and 2015, which was focused on Russia and Russia's role in the region (the fourth section). Finally, in the concluding section, we demonstrate problems that arise when a region-building approach is applied to the BSR and explain how the idea of a “region with sutures” could be developed.

Thinking theoretically about the BSR

The BSR was the poster child for the so-called new regionalism—the regionalisation processes (both inter-state
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Almost all of the literature defines regionalism as a collection of policies and projects designed to form regions, which may lead to institution building (Lombaerde, de and Söderbaum 2013, xxix). Hameiri (2013, 318) also emphasized the formal and state-led nature of region making as states pursue shared goals together. Regionalisation is “the (empirical) process that leads to patterns of cooperation, integration, complementarity and convergence within a particular cross-national geographical space” (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000). Often, “new” regions were praised for their bottom-up approaches, which usually meant that cooperative initiatives were coming transnationally from non-state actors, or—and this happens more often—non-state actors were included in regional projects.

While discussing the origins and development of the region, a new approach was designed—the region-building approach. It competed with and even overshadowed the traditional continuum of regional analysis that, at one point, spanned from an “inside-out” to an “outside-in” perspective (Neumann 1994, 53–57). One question was the crux of this discussion: Do internal or do external factors have greater influence on regionalisation processes. The constructivist-rooted region-building approach regards regions as socially constructed phenomena, the existences of which are based on shared meanings and practices.

This region-building approach was not only related to the contingencies of the regions, but also to the need to emphasize regions’ changing natures due to shared ideas, similar identities, and common practices that could promote new forms of cooperation. A region is never a finished entity, but consists of a variety of institutions and processes and is perpetually “becoming” (Paassi 2009, 133). Paasi, concerned mostly with sub-state regions, described a consistent pattern of region-building processes: “At first a set of (at times contested) political, economic, or cultural discourses are created concerning the possibility of a region. Such ideas are then introduced into plans and maps and ultimately regions may become materialised so that they have an effect on the actions of citizens and on broader social practices” (Paassi 2009, 134). Even though regions start from ideas and discourse, when thinking about the region-making process, the materiality of a region should never be overlooked: “We normally see regions only on maps but know their existence via the territorial practices of governance and media” (Paassi 2009, 134).

New regionalism most often implies collective identity construction projects, conceived to establish some commonly perceived territorial space; it must encompass some kind of we thinking, some kind of imaginary community. Additionally, though a large part of regionalisation takes place in the economic realm as part of an economic integration process, the new inter-state regionalism is also related to security—not in the traditional, alliance-building sense, but in terms of increasing and strengthening common security. Hence, we can talk of the securitisation of regionalism (Buzan, Waever, and Wilde 1997) in the early 1990s because of the political agendas that emphasized soft security cooperation.

The region-building approach also implies that regions are politically contested. According to Neumann, much of the earlier thinking about regions has neglected this “politics of defining and redefining the region” (Neumann 1994). The creation of a region “is an inherently political act, and it must therefore be reflectively acknowledged and undertaken as such” (Neumann 1994, 58). Often there are several competing interpretations, which clash, coexist side by side, or replace each other. The political nature of region building enhances the more usual approach, and treats regions as social entities and puts more emphasis on the agency of the decision makers (political elites, in Neumann’s terms).

Thus, while analysing regions as social and political phenomena, researchers must consider the agency of
decision, the limits and capabilities of structural and relational factors, and—even more important—must never take power out of analyses of regional dynamics. Though the creation of a region is sometimes implicitly defined as a process happening among equal actors, this is rarely the case, the analysts should always keep power disparities, and therefore, power analyses, in mind.

From this perspective, the Baltic Sea region is more than a reflection of geographic, economic, or cultural conditions. It was formed by particular historic processes and by decisions that affected the balance of regional powers and created new security-cooperation patterns. The BSR was a typical example of region building with institutions’ (such as the most central, the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)) own cooperation projects and security discourses.

Which propositions made it possible for the Baltic Sea area to be defined as a security region and what do these propositions imply? Our next task is to analyse this region-building process in the security-cooperation realm and demonstrate its uneventful and troublesome development.

A bumpy development process

In the early 1990s, region building in Europe, like many other processes at that time, was part of a larger transition: It was one way of adapting to the radically changed international security environment. The regional thinking of the time was based on the idea that cooperation should not be aimed at fighting the outside threat, but at coping with common internal and transnational threats, which could be better addressed through cooperative action.

The thinking about new regions was developing parallel to new approaches to security. An understanding of security had expanded beyond the military dimension, the core of pre-1990 security agendas. This new concept of security encompassed social, economic, and environmental issues and it was seen as a reflection of post-Cold war realities (see Buzan, Waever, and Wilde 1997). In the policy environment, this wider security scope was defined in terms of soft security (social, economic, and environmental) and hard security (i.e. military). The new terminology emerged with a new emphasis on risks related to economic growth, energy and civil security, and environmental issues (Knudsen 1999, 178).

This new understanding of security concerns was based on the assumption that soft security threats were regionally or globally transnational and that a single state could not deal with them alone. Therefore, inter-state cooperation was attractive and even more necessary than previously; and cooperation between nongovernmental or non-state actors was desirable as well. Having a soft security agenda was seen as an effective way to overcoming state-centred thinking in order to promote security by establishing a collective, regional identity based on common conceptions of threats.

This phenomenon could also be seen in the BSR, where it was believed that a focus on soft security matters would provide an impetus for involving all of the BSR countries in regional cooperation. Dealing with hard security threats by further fostering regional cooperation was not a primary objective. Hard security issues were left to international organizations such as NATO and the OSCE (Etzold 2012, 3).

The BSR is not based solely on security cooperation. In 2016, for example, the CBSS is working on variety of projects, including civil protection, supporting at-risk children, and tax cooperation among other issues (see Council of the Baltic Sea States 2016a). In this chapter, however, we focus specifically on cooperation related to security, which we regard as the primary stimulant of regionalism in the BSR. Yet, different approaches to security within the region, as it will be demonstrated, underpin the BSR's shaky future. Any region-building project is usually based either on an agreed upon security agenda, or on the (implicit) agreement that the region's actors do not need a common security agenda (as when region building is based on economic integration). This section demonstrates why neither of these preconditions exists in the BSR.

Since the beginning of 1990s, four major events changes the European security architecture: the end of the Cold
War, the dual enlargement of NATO and the EU in 2004, the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, and the Ukraine crisis of 2014 and 2015. These four events are also key factors that influenced security cooperation in the BSR and shaped the formation of the BSR as a regional entity. Just after the end of the Cold War, the first regionalising impetus to institutionalize cooperation occurred in 1992 with the establishment of the CBSS to boost regional intergovernmental cooperation between the shore states of the Baltic Sea (Council of the Baltic Sea States 2016b). This group of BSR countries was comprised of allied and neutral Nordic countries and Germany, the newly independent EU and NATO keen Baltic States and Poland, and Russia—“the great unknown” (Tassirani and Williams 2003, 29) at that time. The establishment of the CBSS gave rise to and provided the first ideas for the BSR's regionalisation process.

One of the goals of the CBSS was to bring NATO and the EU countries together with the “outsiders” of that time—Poland, the Baltic States, and Russia—in order to erase dividing lines drawn during the Cold War era (Browning 2005, 91). The alliance-based thinking of the Cold War was giving way to new regional identities, multilateral cooperation, and efforts to build “a forum for the exchange of ideas concerning regional issues of common interest” (Council of the Baltic Sea States 2016b). The CBSS was a type of a socialization process in that it gathered the Baltic shore countries to discuss regional issues and build commonalities. Forming a regional identity was also part of this region-building project.

Another important part of the BSR's regionalisation, supported especially by the Western and Nordic partners, was the wish to engage Russia in a regional cooperation framework based on soft security and so-called low political issues (Browning and Joenniemi 2004). Behind Russia's inclusion in the BSR was the idea that as the region moved away from hard security issues, it also moved from traditional territorial nation-state concerns towards common projects, like nuclear safety, transborder crime, democracy and human rights, trade barriers, and environmental protection (Council of the Baltic Sea States 2016a). Russia's inclusion in the BSR was a conscious gesture, intended to limit thinking about Russia as the other (see Neumann 1999, chap. 3) and to bring Russia closer to the West in order to make Russia more similar, more predictable, and more civilized to the other BSR states.

Efforts to promote cooperation on environmental issues are a good example of how the region's security agenda was pushed to emphasize soft security cooperation (Beazley 2007, 136) and of the region's inclusion of Russia. Nordic countries, especially Sweden and Finland, emphasized their goal of creating an environmentally sustainable region by explicitly prioritizing environmental concerns (Lehti 2009, 23). Environmental concerns were among the main objectives of the regional cooperation agenda among the Baltic Sea shore countries, and were also mentioned in the EU's strategy for the BSR and in the Northern Dimension Initiative (“What Is the EUSBSR” 2016). The Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (“Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership” 2016), which formed in 2001 with the aim of tackling environmental issues in Russia, is a good illustration of attempts to develop inclusive regional cooperation. The initial aim of this initiative was to promote dialogue and concrete cooperation with Russia by building new institutional ties with Russia's regional partners. In addition, the NDI and the CBSS—both of which were based on “cooperation by inclusion”—were treating Russia as an equal partner.

Looking from the other side of the sea, the Baltic States did not dismiss hard security issues—the presence of Russian military forces on their ground made them much more cautious than their counterparts in the North about Russia's active involvement in regional activities. Following the EU's enlargement in 2004, the Baltic Sea region was transformed into a European inland sea and regional cooperation shifted towards the European level (Lehti 2009, 23). This brought some uncertainty into the region's dialogues because the future relevancy of the old regional institution framework, such as the CBSS formally involving all the BSR shore states, was unclear. As Lehti indicated, after the dual enlargement in 2004, cooperation in the BSR experienced a crisis of purpose and motivation because the CBSS was no longer seen an important instrument for pursuing common interests (Lehti 2009, 23).

Russia has also been concerned about the future role of the CBSS, which served as Russia's legal framework for cooperation with Western countries and treated Russia as an equal and full-fledged member. Indeed, as it was outlined, Russia worried about the CBSS becoming an instrument of the EU, which could dilute the BSR's
existing all-inclusive cooperation format (Oldberg 2012, 14). The EU’s strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, adopted just after the Russian-Georgian War in 2008, did not include Russia as a partner on equal terms (European Commission 2009). Although the strategy outlined the necessity of close cooperation with Russia in tackling joint regional challenges (mainly through the NDI and the CBSS), it was essentially an internal strategy, targeted primarily at promoting cooperation and coordination among the BSR’s EU member states.

When Poland and the three Baltic countries joined the NATO alliance in 1999 and 2004 respectively, the question of redefining relations with Russia was raised. Russia was not affiliated with any union or alliance and reluctantly accepted the NATO enlargement with cautious concerns about the possibility of even further NATO expansion. This reluctance soon transformed into open hostility when Russia officially identified NATO as a national security threat (Tassinari 2005, 392). After NATO's two enlargements, Russia’s involvement in regional cooperation became more problematic and questions about dividing lines started to resurface. The NATO and the EU expansions to the Baltic Sea region drew a dividing line between the BSR's NATO and EU members and Russia, whose status as both an official insider and a constant outsider has not disappeared since.

In the conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008—which some authors have named “a post-Soviet litmus test” of further cooperation with Russia—Russia’s actions demonstrated that Russia regarded the former Soviet territory as a space still within its sphere of influence (Gotkowska 2014; Kunz 2015, 8), which constituted another profound phase in the BSR’s security cooperation. The war between Georgia and Russia rekindled traditional security concerns, which threatened the BSR’s stability and integrity. Russia’s demonstrated readiness to invade foreign territories also diminished the Baltic Sea states’ confidence in the BSR. For example, in Lithuania's mainstream security discourse agitations over Russia’s potential actions with its neighbours resurfaced (Jakiņuaitė 2015). As a consequence, the rest of the Baltic Sea states intensified their bilateral and multilateral cooperation on hard security issues. Nordic defence cooperation was reinvigorated after 2009 with the launch of Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO), which more actively involved its Baltic counterparts in initiating a new Nordic-Baltic military cooperation dimension (Kaljurand et al. 2012, 61). Although Nordic-Baltic defence cooperation was not dedicated to building institutional affiliations in terms of alliances, it constituted a clear and hard division between the Nordic-Baltic countries and Russia.

Even more significant changes in thinking about security cooperation have taken place since the crisis in Ukraine that started in early 2014 and was followed by the Russian annexation of Crimea. Russia’s behaviour towards Ukraine revived debates about traditional security challenges and cast doubts about Russia’s participation in regional Baltic Sea initiatives. Many BSR countries have officially condemned Russia’s actions in Ukraine by declaring Russia a threat to their own national and regional security (State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania 2015; Blair 2015). A shared perception of a Russian threat further strengthened Nordic–Baltic defence cooperation and, after 2014, the Baltic countries were invited to participate in almost all of NORDEFCO's projects (Kaljurand et al. 2012, 62).

The recent upheavals in Ukraine have not only challenged the region's security environment, but have also impacted the normative and institutional practices that BSR countries had been developing since the early 1990s. Russia’s actions in Ukraine and in the BSR neighbourhood are politically and normatively dividing the region. And now the key question driving the debate on regional security cooperation is: To what extent can the BSR's existing cooperative efforts be further developed when a regional power threatens the BSR's stability and sustainability?

A quick analysis of the BSR's security cooperation over a quarter of a century demonstrates that a deeper level of regionalisation has not been achieved in the Baltic Sea territory. The efforts of the last twenty-five years did not lead to "cooperation, integration, complementarity, and convergence" (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000). The regionalisation process in the BSR stalled and observers noted policy complacency, a lack of leadership, and a lack of a vision for what the next phase of the regionalism and of what the project in this phase should entail.

The inception of the region was grounded in the different ideas about the goals of regionalism and already contradictory approaches to cooperation. It can be assumed—as some integrationist theorists note, and as constructivists paying closer attention to the socialization process emphasize—that common projects and
activities could erase contradictions or help a region redefine its initial goals as those that help states meet common objectives, which would also move a region towards a more coherent regional identity. In the case of BSR, however, this did not occur.

The problem with BSR's cooperation was not only that its common projects and activities stalled. The bigger problem was that the BSR states had different understandings of their regions, varying conceptions of the levels and types of security cooperation they were to engage in together, and incompatible perceptions of each other. And, due to its specific position and attitude towards the BSR, the crucial player here, as the previous analysis demonstrates, is Russia.

**Russia: unwilling and detached**

As the analysis of the security cooperation in the BSR—or more exactly, hindrances to security cooperation—demonstrates, Russia is a significant player in the BSR's region-building process; however, Russia does not contribute to developing common BSR building process. Four crucial aspects should be taken into consideration in order to understand Russia’s role in the BSR.

First, the BSR since its inception, and throughout its twenty years of existence, is unimaginable without Russia. It was conceived mainly as a way to include Russia in a European project that sought partly to “tame” Russia, partly to “civilize” Russia, and partly to “befriend” Russia. These goals for Russia's inclusion rest on beliefs in the power of socialisation and in the positive effects of “doing the things together.” Without Russia, the BSR becomes just a Nordic-Baltic cooperation in the broader European cooperation framework, mostly in the EU context. With Russia, though, the BSR is something different: a region with slightly different borders, where an outsider can also be an insider and where tangible cooperation with Russia takes place. Eliminating Russia from the BSR would entail an overhaul of the core idea behind the BSR's formation, which would probably change regional cooperation to that of any other subregion of the EU with particular interests and specific projects.

The second aspect of thinking about Russia involves Russia's great power ambitions and the resulting impact on regional cooperation projects. Russia's foreign policy makers perceive Russia as an important global player, with significant influence on world politics, especially where its interests are concerned. For example, in one of the Vladimir Putin's interviews, readers find the remark that “Russia does not ask for great power status. It is a great power,” (“Интервью Президента России В.В.Путина газете “Вельт ам Зоннтаг” 2000) a sentiment that also appears in other statements (Лавров 2007). This thinking presumes that Russia should talk to and negotiate primarily with other great powers. Therefore, Russian foreign policy reveals a preference for bilateral cooperation with other great powers. Russia uses multilateral frameworks symbolically (in BRICS, for example), when Russia plays a dominant role—as it does in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and in the Commonwealth of Independent States—when it can use an institutional setting for its own goals (as Russia often does with the OSCE), and when it is working within a framework of Russia's own rules (such as the Eurasian Union). The BSR's framework, with its focus on cooperative consensus-building strategies is not a framework that Russia can easily abuse or use to achieve its own goals. Besides, Russia's great power identity implies that Russia's attention is spread globally, reducing the BSR region to a “local” issue rather than an arena for the power games Russia openly prefers.

Third, in its domestic sphere, Russia constructs its identity as a state in opposition to the West. And, domestically, the West is construed as a threat to Russia's very survival, to Russia's values and to Russian traditions. This clear us vs. them mentality based on bordering practices has been produced and supported in Russia's mainstream mass media for more than ten years (see, for example, Hanson et al. 2012). In this context, it is hard to develop any overlapping projects that would involve cooperative Russian and Western political practices.

Finally, we have the issue of the Baltic States and Poland, the most anti-Russian states in the EU and NATO. These states distrust Russia. Moreover, their integrationist projects were based on and justified through a consensus over the necessity to move as far as possible from Russia's influence. Currently, there is no
meaningful communication between Russia and these states and any projects implemented in the Baltic Sea area undertaken with a great deal of suspicion (the critical reactions of Poland, and the Baltic states to the development of NordStream is a good example, see Ziegler 2013, 13). Russia did not conceal its attempt to influence the southern part of the BSR, for example, when it proposed its security guarantees—proposals that other states either did not support or dismissed entirely. When the Baltic States got closer to NATO membership, Russia increased its pressure and voiced even more discontent about the NATO enlargement. This also had a negative effect on the BSR cooperation. Together, these aspects explain why regional cooperative projects are not an active part of Russia's security and foreign policy thinking and why Russia's level of involvement in BSR matters was consistently passive and usually reactive. NordStream, the biggest project implemented by Russia in the Baltic Sea region, was developed bilaterally with Germany.

From the beginning, Russia was a reluctant actor in the Baltic Sea regionalisation process. The BSR was perceived by Russia as a European project, which was sometimes even perceived as Western “neo-imperialism” aimed at Russia, especially in the early years when Russia was intent on regaining a stronger position in global politics (see also Browning, Joenniemi, 2004, 238). Knudsen notices that “on the diplomatic level, Russian policy towards the Baltic Sea region became gradually more explicit [only] after February 1997” when Russia started formulating its official position on relations with the Baltic states and began to talk about economic cooperation and confidence building (Knudsen 1998, 13).

Russia supposedly accepted the EU and NATO enlargements of 2004. Some were even bold enough to state, “security no longer informs Russia’s image of the region,” adding that “there is nothing to replace security as the basis for region-building” (Morozov 2004, 326), as fighting environmental threats was not enough. It must be admitted that many were lured into thinking about a more open and European Russia during the Putin's first term, and did so with the help of Putin himself (for a review of Putin's early years of foreign policy, see Lo 2003). Indeed, the first statement—that security no longer preoccupied region building—did not prove to be true; but the second statement—that there was no basis for security, or for any cooperation—persisted and still seemed valid at the end of 2015.

Even though Russian presidency in the CBSS in 2013 did not provide sufficient momentum to force Russia to think more consistently about the BSR, it obliged Russia to produce official goals and plans for the Council. However, as Sergunin and Makarychev observed, Russia did not seem to be willing to develop any new concepts and its program consisted of a “paradoxical mixture” of general declarations and technocratic approaches (Makarychev and Sergunin 2013, 5). The agenda seemed to be more of a rip-off of the EU-Russia cooperation agenda; most of the agenda items were not clearly connected to BSR matters. “Diffuse incompletion” (Knudsen 1998, 37) still appropriately describes Russia's attitude towards the BSR's activities.

Thus, Russia’s foreign and security policies towards the BSR were based more on confrontation than on cooperation. In addition to Russia's general attitude towards Baltic Sea regionalism, the attitudes and actions of the three Baltic states also matter. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are often perceived as periphery of Russia that harbour harsh attitudes towards Russia. Although they do not play a decisive role in Russia's global foreign policy, some still feel the Baltic states are firmly in Russia's backyard and should stay under Russia's control (Jakniūnaitė 2009). Thus, we can state that Russia clearly does not need BSR project to further its foreign and security policies. When Russia has an “important” issue to solve, Russia prefers bilateral contacts and communication, which are both the most effective options and the default options for Russia.

Due to Russia's policy indifference and because of its scepticism towards multilateral projects that are not its own creation, Russia is not only the largest state in the BSR, but the highest hurdle to jump in order to advance regionalisation. Region building, which often assumes that regionalism is driven by common bottom-up social and political practices, rarely directly accounts for power dynamics among the region's states; region building also tends to disregard the need to ground a regional identity in friendships and partnerships. The importance of the last point is demonstrated in the next section.
Lithuania and the external-internal threat in the BSR

For the Baltic states—and one can assume, for Poland too—Russia's distance from and indifference towards the BSR is not a loss. In fact, the Baltic states and Poland would find the opposite scenario—Russia's enthusiastic cooperation in the BSR—much more threatening. This Polish and Baltic wariness of Russia's BSR participation can be explained through an analysis of Lithuania's official security discourses in 2014 and 2015. This discourse reveals that though (theoretically) the BSR cannot exist without Russia, it is impossible for some states to live in the BSR with Russia.

Becoming an active and integral part of the BSR meant two things to the Baltic States. First, the BSR hastened the Baltic states' integration into two key Western structures: the EU and NATO. The BSR was “a training ground of the transition process, via which they could prove their 'acceptableness' and 'Europeanness' to the rest of the Western Europe and NATO” (Browning and Joenniemi 2004, 237). However, the Baltic States were initially cautious about their participation in the Baltic Sea area, as they perceived these projects would be diversions from their main goal or even worse, an excuse to leave them “in the grey zone between East and West” (Browning and Joenniemi 2004, 237). Therefore, the Baltic states and Poland were less proactive in building regional security cooperation. Hans Mouritzen noted that the Baltic states and Poland de-emphasized the importance of cooperation in the security field because they feared that closer cooperation could diminish efforts to integrate them into Western security frameworks (Mouritzen, 2009, 4). But this perception soon changed and the building of the Baltic Sea Region provided not only a testing ground, but also offered the possibility of “practicing” sovereignty and the opportunity to receive practical recognition.

Second, the Baltic states saw the BSR as an opportunity to distance themselves from Russia. Many authors discussed the attitudes of the Baltic states towards Russia and wondered how these attitudes motivated the Baltic states' foreign policies and national identity politics (Berg and Ehin 2009; Miniotaite 2003). The Baltic countries' engagement and cooperation with their Western and Nordic partners was mainly aimed at avoiding Russia’s influence and at enhancing security by gaining protection guarantees (Browning 2004, 90). Consequently, the extension of Euro-Atlantic structures to the Baltic Sea area led the BSR's security cooperation to a new phase of development. However, the BSR was a strange space, where in order to secure distance from Russia (through support and guarantees), states had to get closer to Russia. Participation in the BSR required states to demonstrate their preparedness to play by Western and Nordic rules, which involved adopting a cooperative, consensus-building attitude, and putting aside the fears and mistrust engendered in the past. Of course, this implied maintaining polite and understanding behaviour towards Russia, a fellow BSR member.

However, the Ukrainian events unequivocally demonstrated, again, the impossibility of imagining cooperative projects with Russia anywhere. Lithuania’s vision of Russia and of Russia's role in the Baltic Sea Region is strongly linked with its own historical experiences, particularly with the periods of Russian occupation, and with regional security dynamics. Sharing an immediate neighbourhood with Russia has consistently and strongly affected Lithuania's security discourses. Since Lithuania re-established its independence, the country's security discourses have been dominated by Lithuania's reliance on Western countries as a security guarantee and by Lithuania's separation from the East—with a focus on Lithuania's separation from Russia. Miniotaite noticed that, “the Baltic countries were creating the narrative of belonging to the West, where the East had to play the role of threatening 'others’” (Miniotaite 2003, 214). In Lithuania, positive identifications with Europe were related to the country's separation from Russia. Thus, though Lithuania has always dealt cautiously with Russia, its careful attitude is even more wary given the 2014 resurgence of tensions between Russia and Ukraine, especially after the annexation of Crimea (for a general overview of the relations during the last decade see Jakniūnaitė 2015).

Since 2014, Lithuania's security discourse has been dominated by the need for a clearer division between Lithuania and Russia that emphasizes the adverse nature of the latter and the regional security threat Russia poses both in the Baltic Sea and Eastern Europe. In the 2014 annual threat assessment published by Lithuania's State Security Department, Russia was named as the primary threat to the security of Lithuania and other Baltic states. The report defined Russia as a provocative and unreliable neighbour that threatened the political stability
and territorial integrity of its neighbouring countries (State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania 2015).

In terms of the BSR’s cooperation, Russia was excluded as an equal partner because of Russia’s dominating hegemonic ambitions (BNS 2015). Lithuanian officials stated that dialogue with Russia was not possible due to Russia’s “unpredictability” and “demonstrated aggression” (BNS 2015) against other sovereign countries. Lithuania’s permanent representative to the UN, Ambassador Raimonda Murmokaitė, opened a 2014 speech to the UN Security Council meeting with the following: “An undeclared war is being waged by Russia against Ukraine. By now, barely making the world’s headlines, because it is slow and creeping—a few more meters of captured land, a few more explosions, a few more Russian tanks, a few more dead at a time” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania 2014). Lithuania’s president has even called Russia “a terrorist state,” thus underlining Russia’s non-compliance with Western norms and values, constitutive elements of the current international order (Weymouth 2014). In Lithuania’s official rhetoric, Russia is mainly treated with fear and distrust—“We cannot trust Russia” (Podpruginas 2014)—not only in military terms, but also in relation to energy security and regional economic development. Lithuania does not see Russia as a reliable partner for hard or soft security related matters — “No mutual cooperation with Russia is possible in the short term” (Gudavičius 2015).

Thus, in Lithuania, regional thinking and region building does not involve mutually cooperative engagement with Russia. While discussing BSR cooperation in terms of either hard or soft security issues, the Lithuanian political elite refer mostly to Nordic-Baltic (NB) cooperation. In Lithuanian discourse, the NB8 (format which includes three Baltic states and five Nordic states) is often seen as a successful regional cooperation platform (for example, “Baltic Sea Region – Example of Successful Cooperation in the EU” 2013). Germany and Poland are mentioned more as bilateral partners, whereas Russia is perceived as uncooperative.

The BSR in Lithuanian security discourse is more often perceived as a political rather than as a geographical entity. This can be demonstrated by the fact that particular attention is given to the role of the US in security discussions. The US is considered to be of a great importance in preserving stability and security both in the BSR and in Central and Eastern European countries. The US features dominantly in Lithuanian discourse as a primary security provider. As a strategic partner, Lithuanian discourse defines the US and American leadership as “vital” to the BSR’s security, “... such transatlantic unity is the only response to the increasingly growing aggression” (East 2015). Security in the BSR is described as a common interest shared by NB countries and the US. In other words, with respect to hard security issues, the BSR is seen not only as a platform bound by its shore states, but also as an essential element of the entire transatlantic security system, which points to the broader context of the BSR project.

To sum up, Lithuanian security discourse reflects the radical tensions in the BSR in general and in the BSR’s southern flank in particular. Lithuania’s goal is to create a limited space of security that promotes friendships and alliances among insiders, but also contains and deters the other, the outsiders. Lithuanian discourse indicates that Lithuania does not anticipate Russia will commence to think differently than it currently does and thus, Lithuania has no expectations for Russia to change. Given this logic, the BSR is defined without Russia and placed in a European and Euro-Atlantic context to protect the Baltic states from threats coming from Russia. Thus, the BSR is implicitly understood in Lithuania as a bounded space without Russia.

A region with sutures?

This chapter explored the possibilities and challenges of the Baltic Sea state’s regionalism when the BSR’s largest and most powerful member, Russia, failed to exhibit cooperative or even friendly behaviour—some BSR states feel insecure because of their perceptions of Russia. In 1998, Knudsen asked “How does one create a new regional security-community where none existed before?” (Knudsen 1998, 7). In the early 1990s, radical constructivist ideas about the power of shared meanings were supplemented by practical efforts to realize new projects. Then, it was audacious, but not outrageous, to ask “Is it possible to construct a region as it were ex
nihilo?” and to answer affirmatively with “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” (Neumann 1994, 73). It certainly seemed so, and probably still is assumed that the main actors agree on these reasons and justification, at least to a certain extent. Yet even given the optimism of the new regionalism, no one was naive enough to deem it an easy endeavour.

During the last twenty-five years, the BSR's security cooperation has undergone several changes, driven by both hard and soft security issues. An emphasis on soft security was more visible in cooperation within regional institutional frameworks, such as the CBSS or ND. Cooperation on soft security issues kept Russia partially engaged in regional affairs. The BSR's most challenging issue, however, has been that of facilitating Russia’s relations with its regional partners to develop an inclusive cooperation framework despite Russia’s contradictory foreign policy, a factor that divided the region.

Even if the BSR had a specific goal, responsible and active leadership, and the enthusiasm of the majority of its members, it would still be difficult to perceive the BSR as a successful regional project. Regionalisation is challenged by sizeable power and status disparities among states and regionalisation is further hindered when the political reality is incapable of overcoming significant differences in security perceptions. The BSR is made up of countries possessing not only different identities, but also different foreign and security policies—and these differences are often emphasized more than the need to overcome existing divisions of interest facing the region is.

As we demonstrated in this chapter, while Russia does not visibly disapprove of the BSR, for Russia, the BSR hardly exists. Russia seems to regard the BSR as just another European institutional framework that may eventually serve Russia, but certainly is not useful to Russia now. As a result, the BSR is increasingly virtual to all of its members. Togetherness requires action and similar thinking. With neither action nor similar thinking uniting the region's states, the BSR's future will become even less plausible and less believable.

The suture metaphor works perfectly in this case. Russia, in the BSR, was an insider yet also a constant outsider—both by its own volition, and by the perceptions and projections of other insiders. Russia's ambiguous status leaves the BSR open and incomplete. Furthermore, Russia's dual insider and outsider positioning offers the BSR neither creative outcomes, nor a means of overcoming modernist, enclosing bordering practices. Instead Russia's participation in the situation, through this suturing effect, threatens to either erase the subject itself, the Baltic Sea region, or force the BSR to become ghostlike as it simply pretends to be alive.

From the other side, the concept of suturing allows distance from the region-building paradigm that implies region building as based on a definite blueprint. Instead we might think of the BSR as a sutured region, as a space that is impossible to close (or foreclose), despite the prospect of focusing regional cooperation on hard security. The BSR was built on a post-Cold War paradigm—that still serves as the basis for its existence, at least on the CBSS level. Approaching Russia as a part of the BSR's founding infrastructure, even if the current context changes, leaves the BSR with only a few chances to implement the original Baltic regionalism design.

Bibliography


2 We do not imply that these events where the only events which challenged European security, but only that these were the most important events to developments in the BSR.

3 In this chapter we do not analyse the role and activities of Poland and Germany. For our purposes, it is enough to analyse the opposing positions of two players in order to demonstrate the problems of the region-building approach in the BSR.

4 Though only the Lithuanian example is analysed in this chapter, these conclusions can be generalised to all three Baltic States. There are some subtle differences in their approaches towards Russia’s role in general, however, here these difference do not play a significant analytical role. A similar position is taken by Berg and Ehin (2009).