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Mare Nostrum

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Preface

The seminar's intention was to discuss the actual status of Baltic Sea cooperation on the eve of the German EU presidency. It brought together experts on regional and European policies from all EU member states of the region besides Sweden, most of them researchers, journalists, politicians and government officials. The main topics had been the general importance of Baltic Sea cooperation, the suitability of its institutional framework and Germany's contribution to the formation of cooperation patterns. Furthermore a number of policy issues with particular relevance for the region – i.e. energy, infrastructure and economy – were brought into focus. Finally the participants had good opportunities to become familiar with the central objectives of the German EU presidency.

This survey will address those topics and summarize the main results of the lectures and discussions. This will be done in a synoptical way, which means that the following paragraphs do not correspond with the order in the seminar programme. Instead they bring together statements and reflections from different participants to one and the same issue. Through that it should be easier to compare the various assessments on certain topics that had been made during the whole course of the seminar.

Does there exist a common Baltic Sea identity?

In his presentation on Germany's political, historical and cultural ties towards the Baltic Sea Bernd Henningsen from the Humboldt-University Berlin explained that there is a substantial basis for a common Baltic Sea Regional identity, rooting in common historical experiences since the Middle Ages. As one characteristic example he pointed out the similar architecture of medieval city centres all over the region. The brick stone as the predominant building material was also mentioned by him as one part of the common heritage. Together with traces from the Low German language in all other languages of the Baltic Sea Region these are all cultural expressions from a period within the region's history, in which the Hanseatic League was the dominating power not only in terms of economy and trade but also with regard to its political and cultural influence.

From conflict to cooperation

Henningsen presented an overview over the Baltic Sea Region's history interpreting it as the struggle for hegemony of one great power following the other. This history of conflicts which culminated in the very extreme experience for the people in the Baltic Sea Region being divided between the eastern and the western world during the Cold War is something which today ties together all countries within the region. Almost unique is the era of peaceful change which the region is experiencing since the 90s. Some observers had feared, that it could become a second Balkan with heavy civil wars. But those pessimistic scenarios did not

become true. In contrast the region managed to transform in a peaceful way and by doing so became a model for peaceful change even for other regions in the world. For Henningsen this is the crucial point in explaining what the region's identity is about. It is based upon the common certainty of its inhabitants that the conflictual past has been left behind and is today substituted by a new function of the region namely of being a pioneer of peaceful change.

The concept of the New Hanse

As far as Germany's actual role as a region builder is concerned Henningsen reminded that it was the German state of Schleswig-Holstein which invented the concept of the New Hanse already after the mid 1980s. Using its connotations of pragmatic and effective cooperation between subnational units like cities and regions and leaving out issues of high politics the idea of the New Hanse contributed a lot to the establishment of contacts between the eastern and the western parts of the Baltic Sea Region already before the fall of the Iron Curtain. It thereby created the ideal ground on which in the early 90s a large number of new cooperation patterns emerged that brought together the formerly divided region.

However, Henningsen also made clear that in the long run the concept of the New Hanse turned out to be the wrong one at least for some of the countries within the region, where negative connotations with regard to the historic Hanseatic League are prevailing. They remember this confederation of cities as a medieval German great power which dominated politics and economy in Northern Europe and almost excluded non-German merchants from the benefits of trade.

During the discussion of Henningsen's presentation a participant from Denmark expressed doubts whether it is really appropriate to speak about a common Baltic Sea identity. At least as far as Denmark is concerned she could not see that there exists a "we-feeling" even in an initial stage which determines her countries relations to Germany. On the contrary since many centuries the Danish identity had been constructed on the basis of a self-perception of being different and distancing one self from Germany. So if anything like a Baltic Sea identity exists in Denmark it only comprises the Nordic and to a lower extend also the Baltic countries but not the larger states of the region.

Objectives for the forthcoming German EU presidency

Germany takes over the EU presidency from Finland on 1 January 2007. During the seminar four representatives from the German Federal Government, Ekkehard Brose, Claus Krumrei and Peter Ptassek from the Foreign Office and Nikolaus Meyer-Landrut from the Office of the Federal Chancellor outlined some of the main objectives that Germany will pursue during this period. Throughout the EU there are high expectations that Germany will be able to push forward European integration in general and make progress within some specific policy

areas. However, it may cause disappointments if one expects too much from one single presidency. It mainly will have to handle questions of everyday politics and react to sudden unpredictable events which may cross any ever so well-considered strategy.

The constitutional treaty

Anyhow Germany is prepared to address two major challenges in actual European politics. The first one is the unclear future of the constitutional treaty. Brose underlined that it is Germany's goal to bring about an agreement on a procedure that will lead to a new acceptance of the treaty during the French presidency in the second half of 2008. Concerning any possible requests to renegotiate the treaty it is Germany's position that in any case the essence of the current draft has to be preserved.

It seems to be a lucky coincidence that the 50th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome can be celebrated during the German presidency. Meyer-Landrut considers this event as a good opportunity for general reflections about achievements, common values and future visions for European integration. The celebration may also help to create the kind of atmosphere, which is needed to make substantial progress towards the realisation of the constitutional treaty.

Energy policies

One important issue on which Germany will put special emphasis during its presidency will be energy policies. Ptassek announced that one European Council will be dedicated to this topic in March 2007. On this occasion questions like security of supply and the liberalization of energy markets as well as the fulfilment of the Kyoto targets will be discussed.

Until now the EU has very little competencies in energy policies and Ptassek underlined that all member states agree not to introduce a common energy policy even in the near future. However, Europe is facing some major challenges right now that make a more concerted action within energy policies necessary. The most urgent issues are fears of supply shortages, increased global competition on access to energy producing countries and the need to react to the threat of climate change.

Concerning the EU's external energy relations Russia are of outstanding importance. Many of the member states have Russia as their main supplier of gas and oil. Incidents like the interruption of gas deliveries to the Ukraine last winter and strong irritations among the other Baltic Sea states, which were caused by the bilateral German-Russian decision to build a gas pipeline through the Baltic Sea, have underlined the urgency to develop a more coherent European approach concerning the Union's energy relations with Russia. This is what Germany will push forward during the European Council on energy policies. The strategic aim is to bind the main supplier (Russia) and the main consumers (the EU member states) closer together and strengthen their mutual relations by integrating the energy dimension into the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Since Russia is refusing to become a member

of the Energy Charta this could be an alternative way to make energy relations more reliable for both sides.

Brose as well as Ptassek argued that international energy relations should generally be regarded more as a question of how to balance two equal partners' interests. Until now those relations are too much discussed from the viewpoint of the consumer countries depending on gas deliveries from the producing countries. But it should be much more taken into account that there is also the dependency of the latter on being able to sell the gas under stable conditions and over a long period of time. Any ambitions within Europe to diversify its energy supply for instance by increasing the use of nuclear or renewable energy sources or to reduce demand by increasing energy efficiency could cause fears in Russia that Europe is not a secure energy buyer within a long term perspective.

It will be of outstanding importance for future energy relations with Russia to integrate them into a comprehensive and binding institutional framework. This is not only to ensure greater mutual reliability concerning the security of supply and demand. Agnieszka Walter-Drop from the Polish Embassy in Berlin pointed out that there also is a need to work for more balanced relations concerning the feasibility of investments in both directions. Whereas considerable amounts of Russian capital are currently flowing into EU countries European companies do not in the same degree have the chance to make investments in Russia.

Making the EU a more coherent actor

One general goal of German EU policy is to make the Union a more coherent and efficient foreign policy actor. The Federal Government is therefore not willing to fall back behind the institutional reforms that all member states had been agreed upon in the constitutional treaty. Beyond that Germany has a very clear position not to give a membership perspective to further neighbour countries like for instance the Ukraine. Brose explained that any further enlargements within the foreseeable future would overstress the EU's decision-making structures and by doing so weaken Europe's potential to act as a stabilization force within the world's crisis regions. He argued instead for the development of a constructive and attractive European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Any support to unrealistic hopes that more states in the east and south could get a membership perspective would only produce disappointment. As one of the world's regions where a more coherent European foreign policy could have a positive impact on social and economic developments Krumrei mentioned Central Asia. Also Walther Stütze from the University of Potsdam supported in his lecture the estimation that the EU needs a much more purposive foreign policy based on a strong feeling of solidarity among its member states.

Institutions and structures of Baltic Sea cooperation

One interesting result from the discussion of Henningsen's presentation was the conclusion that only in historic times the Baltic Sea Region had its own power centre, which was located inside the region. Those former "capitals" of the Baltic Sea – namely Lübeck, Copenhagen, Stockholm and St. Petersburg – had been coastal cities representing the great powers of the past (i.e. the Hanseatic League, the Union of Kalmar, the Swedish Empire and Russia) that succeeded one after another in the role of the regions hegemon. In contrast since the 20th century those capitals that exert extraordinary political influences throughout the region (i.e. Berlin, Moscow, Brussels) are not longer located inside the region.

This situation may be one explanation why none of the numerous new political institutions which were founded to stimulate regional cooperation in recent years developed into really powerful organisations. In the end they all depend on developments which are shaped outside the region.

The Council of the Baltic Sea States

One of the most promising of those new organisations had been the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) which was founded as a joint German-Danish initiative in 1992. However, many participants of the seminar agreed on the assessment of Esko Antola from the University of Turku, who declared that this organisation already "has lived its life". It had fulfilled some important tasks during the 90s. At that time it was needed as a tool to stabilize international cooperation patterns in North-eastern Europe, which had become rather weak after the dissolution of both the Warsaw Treaty Organisation and the Soviet Union. But with the gradual expansion of the EU and NATO throughout the region (Sweden's and Finland's EU-accession in 1995, Poland's NATO-accession in 1999 and Poland's, Lithuania's, Latvia's and Estonia's EU- respectively NATO-accession in 2004) those greater organisations have taken over almost all tasks of the CBSS and to some extent also of other regional institutions like for instance the Nordic Council.

The Northern Dimension Initiative

One issue that had been discussed again and again during the seminar was the question whether there today at all is a need for regional cooperation structures apart from the EU. On the contrary many speakers and commentators argued that it would be in the region's best if its special interests would be handled within the EU's institutional framework. One approach going in that direction is the EU's Northern Dimension initiative (ND). It was the subject of the lecture by Holger Moroff from the University of Jena.

The ND was originally a Finnish initiative. It started in 1999 as a new policy with the objective to draw the EU's attention to its North-eastern periphery. Through the development of action plans the ND has become a part of the EU's external policy. As Moroff pointed out it

nowadays even serves as a model for the ENP. Both ND and ENP do have the common goal to avoid or at least moderate new dividing lines along the EU's external borders, something that otherwise threatens to emerge after the completion of eastern enlargement.

Concerning the ND's impact on the development of cooperation patterns within the Baltic Sea Region Moroff pointed to several positive effects. In his view the ND must not necessarily be seen as a challenge, threatening the existence of other regional institutions. It might rather be seen as a supplementing institution, helping to improve the functioning of other instruments and to coordinate the efforts of all relevant actors to reach their common goals.

Having no own budget at its disposal the ND cannot realize anything without including other actors in its projects. Therefore its natural task is to take over the role of a motor, which in close cooperation with national states and regional organisations pushes forward the development of transnational policies and projects for North-eastern Europe (including its Russian parts). The same procedure goes also for the financing of those projects. The ND's task is to pool financial resources from various international financial institutions (i.e. the World Bank, the Nordic Investment Bank, the EBRD or the European Investment Bank) and channel them to the projects that are carried out under its umbrella.

Another positive aspect of the ND is its multilateral character. This is also something which is different from the ENP. With Russia, Norway and Iceland the ND is involving three non-EU member states into an all-European institutional framework, where they meet one another on an equal footing.

Baltic Sea pressure groups inside the EU

Furthermore Moroff pointed to the fact that the ND does not only stimulate cooperation among actors within the region but also contributes to a rising awareness of having a common regional background among EU politicians in Brussels coming from the Baltic Sea states. Something like a Baltic Sea pressure group is emerging from inside the EU, defined by Antola and Axel Voss, the German Foreign Offices advisor on Baltic Sea issues, as the "3+3+2" cooperation. This label indicates that there is a rather informal group building process going on among the Baltic Sea member states. However by dividing up these states in three subgroups it shall be implied that there is a difference or maybe one should better say a hierarchy concerning the degree to which they are ready to dedicate themselves to Baltic Sea issues. In this regard the three Nordic states seem to be most ambitious; sometimes they are joined by the three Baltic States and only in certain cases all coastal states including Poland and Germany do act as a united pressure group.

Another pressure group for Baltic Sea issues within the EU was described by Brigitte Langenhagen from the Baltic Sea Forum (BSF). It is the EU-Baltic Intergroup, which was established within the European Parliament in 2004. Since then it regularly holds meetings for its 60-70 members, previous to the sittings of the parliament in Strasbourg. It is

cooperating closely with the BSF and has among others directly influenced the European Commission's draft of an EU-Baltic Sea strategy. One of the concrete outcomes of its work is also the classification of the Baltic Sea as one of Europe's "motorways of the sea".

Langenhagen pointed out that although in many cases the Mediterranean member states are more successful in lobbying for their interests, there is nothing similar within the EU like the Baltic Sea Intergroup for the Mediterranean countries. But she admitted that the reason might be that they just do not need such an instrument because they anyway manage to make their voice heard in European politics.

Coming from an NGO, Langenhagen stressed that one of the strengths of the Baltic Sea Region consists in the crucial role which the civil society plays within the ongoing region building process. The BSF which actually is prepared to fusion with the more business oriented Baltic Sea Development Forum (BSDF) serves mainly as an umbrella organisation, representing around 40 NGOs, which are engaged within various fields of Baltic Sea cooperation.

The B7 secretariat

One of these highly specialised institutions is the B7 secretariat, which David Hunt from the Regional Municipality of Bornholm presented in his lecture. It is a common platform for the seven biggest islands of the Baltic Sea (Bornholm, Gotland, Öland, Åland, Saaremaa, Hiiumaa and Rügen). They have a lot of common starting points. For instance they all are sparsely settled and are located at the periphery of the countries they belong to. This is also the reason why they are facing similar challenges concerning infrastructure, traffic and transport systems, development opportunities, education and access to public services.

Naturally the islands are particular sensitive with regard to the maritime environment and therefore agree to the urgency of strong efforts directed against possible sources of pollution. In general it is the idea of the B7 cooperation to improve living conditions and strengthen the identity of the islanders, who have to cope with living conditions that often are considered as less attractive when compared to life in more central and urban parts of their countries.

The way in which the seven islands work together is a very typical example of how cooperation is going on in many different arenas of the Baltic Sea region. It illustrates the mostly pragmatic and rather informal character of a cooperation, which has not much to do with classical international relations. The B7 shows that Baltic Sea cooperation has a high potential precisely on the subnational level and even is pragmatic enough to comprise political entities which have different competencies depending on the constitutional status which they have in the country they belong to. For instance Åland is an autonomous region within the Republic of Finland, whereas Rügen hardly has any constitutional rights let alone a government which could conduct its own "foreign policy".

Is Germany a Baltic Sea country?

It had been a somehow surprising experience during the seminar that Germany was not often mentioned as an actor within Baltic Sea cooperation. Any greater German efforts to play a role within the region seem to be part of history but not of actual politics. The last major contributions to the region's development which had their starting point in Germany had been Schleswig-Holstein's concept of a New Hanse in the 1980's and the joint German-Danish initiative for the foundation of the CBSS in 1992. In more recent years no similar undertakings have taken place.

Germany – present but not visible?

Consequently among others Antola argued that any further success with regard to the development of Baltic Sea cooperation depends on whether it (once more) will be possible to make Germany (and Poland) "see themselves as Baltic Sea states". However Henningsen introduced another point of view to the discussion about how present Germany is in Baltic Sea politics. He suggested that this might be only a question of perception. He explained that by saying that Germany in fact is playing a role within the region but prefers not to draw too much attention to its actions. As Henningsen put it shortly: "Germany is present – but not visible". The reason for this strategy might be that many observers in the 90's had expected that Germany would soon become the dominating power in the region, a perception which the Federal Government in any case has wanted to avoid.

Both Meyer-Landrut and Krumrei stressed, that the Federal Government today does not consider the Baltic Sea Region as a specific area for German foreign policies. With the completion of the EU- and NATO-enlargements all requirements for cooperation could be sufficiently fulfilled within those two organisations. Meyer-Landrut explained this assessment arguing that Germany has to take the interests of the whole EU into account and that the creation of a Baltic Sea subgroup within the EU would be dangerous because it could isolate the participating states from the rest of the Union. One participant tried to invalidate this argument by replying that neither France is weakening its position within the EU by joining the Mediterranean subgroup in those cases where this is in line with the French national interest.

Although both representatives of the German Federal Government neglected the need for a special German Baltic Sea policy there is the position of an official advisor for Baltic Sea issues within the Foreign Office. Currently it is occupied by Axel Voss. During a panel discussion, which took place in the office of the Federal State of Hamburg, Voss argued that there are still some reasons for Germany to develop Baltic Sea cooperation even after the completion of the two Eastern enlargements.

One reason is the fact that it provides an ideal framework to include Russia on an equal footing. It can be used to find solutions for urgent problems like for instance the handling of

nuclear waste in parts of North-western Russia. Another advantage that Voss mentioned is that Baltic Sea cooperation provides all states within the region with good opportunities to get to know each other and in doing so supports the elaboration of starting points for common actions in the interest of the region. As one example he mentioned maritime policy. However even Voss does not consider the CBSS as the appropriate institution to serve Germany's interests within the Baltic Sea Region but favours instead the "3+3+2" patterns of cooperation which have emerged as an internal EU-platform since 2004.

Also Reinhard Stuth from the government of Hamburg supported the assessment that the CBSS is no longer functioning as the ideal framework for regional cooperation. He complained the geographic expansion of the organisation, saying that "everybody is meeting there". It might not be beneficial for purposive action that non-Baltic Sea states like Iceland participate as full members including the right to take over the presidency. The meetings within the CBSS have become overloaded and confusing since more and more delegations from various European and American observer countries are showing up there.

When asked about the general political role and goals which Germany should pursue within the Baltic Sea Region, Stuth argued that today cross border cooperation within the business community – e.g. between German and Swedish companies – is functioning very well. Therefore German politicians travelling within the region do not longer have to take over the role of a "door opener" for business delegations as it is the case when they travel to China or other more distant parts of the world. In most cases economic cooperation is today doing well without the support from politicians. However there are still topics left, where political coordination would create a surplus value. As one example Stuth mentioned the development of a common marketing strategy for the promotion of the Baltic Sea Region as one single destination for global tourism.

The role of German federal states

Stuth complained that members of the German Federal Government are generally underrepresented at the various institutions and meetings, where Baltic Sea cooperation is taking place. Although he welcomed the fact that today it is considered much more natural for German federal states to pursue their goals in international cooperation on their own – something that still in the 90's was not that easily conceded to Schleswig-Holstein – he underlined the importance at least for small states like Hamburg to be backed by the Federal Government. This is also the reason why he denied a question from the audience whether it would be desirable and in the interest of a more active German contribution to Baltic Sea cooperation to transfer some foreign policy competencies from the federal level to the level of federal states.

Searching for explanations why the German Federal Government seems to be much too reluctant to take over an active role within the region one commentator from the audience suggested that it might be because the three German Baltic Sea states are all rather weak

and without decisive influence within the political system of Germany. If a powerful state like Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg or North Rhine-Westphalia would border on the Baltic Sea it probably would be much more successful in drawing Germany's attention towards its North-eastern neighbour region.

Essential reasons for going on with Baltic Sea cooperation

Although many of the original circumstances under which Baltic Sea cooperation had been set up in the early 90's have changed completely with the expansion of the EU and NATO throughout the region as the most far reaching impact on its cooperation patterns there are still reasons enough to continue with cooperation on a regional scale. There are two main dimensions, where Baltic Sea cooperation is likely to create a surplus value for all participants. These are on the one hand economy, infrastructure and environment and on the other hand culture and identity. Both will be outlined in the following.

Economy

Economically the region is mostly prospering and furthermore has an enormous potential for a promising development. Many speakers agreed on that assessment during the seminar. What often is lacking is that people perceive the single countries economic success as an advantage and a success for the whole region. In other words a "corporate identity", which strengthens the feeling of belonging together among all economic actors in the region and supports a more offensive and self-assured promotion of the Baltic Sea Region in the rest of the world. This became very clear during the lecture of Carsten Schymik from the Humboldt-University Berlin. He presented a survey on "How outsiders perceive the Baltic Sea Region" and came to the conclusion that the region is almost not visible as an economic entity if seen from a global perspective.

Naturally, economic branches that are related to the sea are common starting points for regional development efforts. The respective sectors are ship-building, transport, fishing and tourism. As far as transport is concerned the lecture of Karl-Heinz Breitzmann from the University of Rostock presented some convincing examples of how beneficial regional cooperation can be for the countries involved. For instance the Nordic states managed through effective coordination of their EU-policies, that motorway and railway connections between the Nordic capitals (i.e. Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm and Helsinki) had become part of the Trans European Transport Networks (TETN).

Other transport projects where regional coordination may contribute to improved outcomes are the Fehmarn Belt Bridge and the Rail Baltica project. Breitzmann explained that such projects typically only can get realized through the involvement of international institutions because national governments tend to be not very interested in financing transborder

connections. All in all Breitzmann sees a lot of good reasons why transport issues should be among the central topics within Baltic Sea cooperation. The huge potential is in his view proofed by the so far greatest success of the Baltic Sea pressure groups: The decision of the EU to recognize sea-routes as a part of the TETN motorways.

Energy

One area which has both a high economic potential for the region but also sensitive political implications for the region is energy. What makes the Baltic Sea Region important in this regard is its proximity to Europe's main gas-supplying countries, i.e. Norway and Russia. Furthermore the Baltic Sea serves as one of the major transit routes for oil and gas exports from Russia. Although many of the Baltic Sea states depend heavily on energy imports from those two countries, when seen as a whole, there is a rather high diversity of energy sources within the region. This was also one of the conclusions in the lecture of Kai-Olaf Lang from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. He mentioned in particular the well-balanced energy mix that exists in Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Sweden. A broad variety of energy sources gives reason to the assessment that experiences within the region will give inspirations to the development of energy policies on the EU level, where it will be on top of the agenda during the forthcoming German presidency.

But this readiness for innovation applies not only to the diversification of energy production. Seen from the EU's point of view the experiences that have been made within the Baltic Sea Region with regard to the liberalization of energy markets (for instance the single electricity market comprising Norway, Sweden and Finland and currently expanding to include even Estonia) and the international coordination of energy policies (for instance the common project of the Baltic states to build a new nuclear power plant) are of great value, because they may serve as models for the liberalization of energy markets and for a closer coordination in energy policies within the EU as well.

One major challenge for energy policies within the Baltic Sea Region is related to the unclear role of Russia. It is evident that this implies a considerable potential for conflicts. A solution has to be found which could reduce the tensions that often are involved in energy relations with Russia. According to the seminar's lectures and debates a double strategy seem to be appropriate. On the one hand a more reliable institutional framework has to be developed, which through the multilateralization of energy dependencies reduces the possibilities for single countries to use energy as a tool for political influence. Walter-Drop emphasized such a solution in particular, regarding the origins of European integration in the 1950's as a historic model. Also the 1952 founded European Coal and Steel Community had partly been a result of a strategy to multilateralize energy dependencies (coal) and in doing so was meant to reduce one possible source of conflicts within bilateral relations in Europe. Another strategy emphasized by both Walter-Drop and Lang is to counterbalance Russia's weight as an energy producer through the diversification of energy sources and by avoiding that

Russian companies take over other sectors of the energy business (i.e. transport facilities, refineries etc.) as well.

Culture and Identity

Apart from those arguments related to economy there is another dimension which provides strong arguments in favour of a further strengthening of Baltic Sea cooperation. It is the dimension of identity and culture. As Henningsen had explained there is a profound basis for a common cultural awareness that could tie together the region.

At the same time there is a lack of supply concerning modern people's need to identify with a larger community defined not only in geographic terms but also through the perception of common values and cultural traditions. The national state is increasingly too limited to fulfil these needs and the European level seems to be too abstract. The Baltic Sea Region may provide an appropriate space for the people who live there to create a feeling of belonging together. This became very clear in Schymik's lecture. He concluded by saying that the Baltic Sea Region in many aspects meets the global requirements for a modern society. It is composed partly of former Eastern and Western countries, it is very good prepared to face the challenges of a globalizing world, has brainpower as its most competitive resource and is stabilized by the awareness of a rich common history. Schymik put it shortly in one metaphor, calling the Baltic Sea Region "a wise head on a young body".

Something which makes the Baltic Sea Region quite unique is the huge number of NGOs engaged in transnational cooperation. They contribute a lot to the existence and further development of a strong civil society which in itself is a peculiar expression of a common understanding throughout the region about how a society should function. Other values that seem to prevail in most of the Baltic Sea states underline this assumption. One of the observations which Schymik could make when travelling with outsiders through the region was that they were quite impressed by the respect for egalitarianism throughout the region. Together with deeply rooted democratic traditions and a strong respect for human rights these observations speak in favour of the assumption that the Baltic Sea countries do have some common starting points concerning the cultural basis of their societies and political systems.

However the awareness of a common regional identity and the mutual perception of its inhabitants as natural partners for cooperation is still not self-supporting enough but needs to be strengthened by political action. There are a lot of instruments and institutions that can be used for this purpose. The *ars baltica* project is a good example and likewise the Baltic Sea Secretariat for Youth Affairs in Kiel. Even with a small budget their work can have a particular positive impact on the identity building process. Here even the CBSS may still have its role to play. If not as an active coordination body in everyday politics so at least as an initiator and supporter of transnational NGOs. Until now this latter function has in any case been one of the organisation's most important contributions to the development of Baltic Sea cooperation.