On the emergence of the Baltic Sea region and the reading of the book

Witold Maciejewski

1. Culture and territory or how do regions get to the world?

Our planet Tellus, as pictured in the logo of the Baltic University Programme, has been divided innumerable times by peoples claiming their right to territories. Territory is, besides language and religion, part of the collective, ethnic identity. “Our country”, the fatherland (fosterlandet, ojczyzna, poguna, meän maa, Vaterland etc.) is marked on the map and in our mind as a distinct part of the world we have a special relation to. Not only the peoples who are settled from time immemorial consider themselves to possess their territories; the nomadic tribes also have a notion of their own territory, however much these two can be different. Ethnic cultures include the primary notion of territory. States are considered generally by politologists to be the bearers of cultures, something which is, however necessary, a crude simplification. The third salient marker of identity – religion – is recognized by several authors as uniting cultures in larger structures, called civilisations. Civilisations constitute their own areas that include the territories in possession of ethnic cultures. That is why the world is considered by many to be divided into a few dominating civilisations: Western (i.e. Catholic and Protestant), Orthodox, Islamic, Hinduistic, Confucian, Buddhist and others.

However, religions are not the only factors uniting the peoples into larger communities (and, be sure, discriminating these communities from each other at the same time). Cultures and civilisations produce ideologies, myths, ideas and intellectual streams interpreting and organizing the world we live in. Some of these form frames of reference of more universal value. Multiculturalism and pluralism, ecologism and globalism, democracy and subsidiarity, market economy and solidarity definitely belong to the valid pattern of thinking, created certainly inside the Western civilisation. All of these are based upon internal criticism of European culture, proclaim the value of openness and tend to cross barriers shaped by the local ethnic cultures. Consequently, the ideologies, constructed upon these values, also need their own territories. This is the way regions are procreated on and that is also why the essence of regions consists of the fact that their boundaries are not kept within the frontiers of states, cultures nor civilisations.

Origin of the word region

The very word region belongs to the so-called internationalisms or all-European loans and appears in all languages of the BSR. It is derived from Latin regionalis and related with regio ‘direction, borderline’ and regere ‘to lead, direct, govern’. The notion includes then two relevant semantic items: a more primary, spatial item, and a metaphorical component, implicating a sense of power. Both aspects are relevant for the present description of the Baltic Sea Region.
INTRODUCTION — HOW TO STUDY A REGION
On the emergence of the Baltic Sea region and the reading of the book
Theoretically, the areas, their extension and number of regions are unlimited. However, all creation needs justification in order to be saved from the Ockham razor, cutting off the unnecessary beings. Therefore the goal of the textbook presented is to deliver reasons for distinguishing one of the Europe's macro-regions.

2. Defining the Baltic Sea region (the BSR)

To the outsider looking in, the Baltic Sea region should be a distinct, sharply separated natural area, consisting of the water-filled space in its centre and adjacent lands around the Sea. The problem arises however when the second component is to be defined.

- In 1992 top politicians from several countries established an infrastructure, named the Council of Baltic Sea States, probably the most powerful body of the region. The Council is composed of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia, Sweden and the European Commission. In addition France, Great Britain, Holland, Italy, Ukraine and USA received status as observers. This composition implies that the BSR was comprehended by the top representatives of the countries listed as an area linked to the neighbouring North Sea region and, possibly, to the White Sea region (the Barents region).
- In 1998 the Euroregion Baltic was established by the littoral municipalities of Denmark, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia (Kaliningrad) and Sweden. Links of cooperation are, not surprisingly, closest between the littoral cities.
- In 1974 the Convention for the protection of the Baltic Sea defined the BSR from the ecological perspective as the water drainage area of the Baltic Sea and this is the very point of departure for the Baltic University Programme since the first activities in 1990.

Apart from these, the BSR is often associated with the so-called Balticum, corresponding to the territory of the three “Baltic states” (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia). In addition, there are more than 30 governmental and non-governmental organizations connected to the Baltic Sea and some of them have their own notions of the region.
The Baltic Sea Region has, then, been defined differently depending on the goals of its creators, historical associations, ideological, political or practical grounds. The result must look quite amorphous and any possible attempt at re-defining the Baltic area to provide it with sharp boundaries seems to be burdened with the weakness of arbitrariness. However, a necessary, more prudent proposal, related to the ecological way of thinking, distinguishes between a core region, composed of the countries situated in their entirety within the water drainage area or directly adjacent to the coastal line, and external surrounding countries (the hinterland) possessing more or less extended parts of this area.

The BSR as defined in this prudent way, must be seen as a diversified area:

- Politically, it belongs to nine “coastal states” and five “hinterland countries”,
- it is inhabited by almost 85 million people, which means that every tenth European lives in the BSR.
- These 1.34% of the total world population deliver about 10% of the global industrial production. Most of the Baltic people live in 60 metropolises, half of which have their own airports. About 130 thousand ships harbour in the Baltic ports every year.
- The BSR is also a meeting point of two “hard” security systems: NATO (Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Poland) and the security alliance created by Russian Federation and its partners. Apart from this, two states (Sweden and Finland) are neutral.
- The recent trends to integration have split the region into a western part, leaning towards integration with the European Union or already integrated, and the eastern group of states (Russia, Belarus and Ukraine), seeking their own way.

Although the all above-mentioned notions do not comprise any precise definition, all of them include common negative characteristics. Thus, the region builders plan to construct neither a military block, nor an economic or political union around the Baltic Sea. No outer demands or restrictions that would force anybody to build up any “hard” organization are available either. The Baltic Sea region is a “soft” invention which may be provided with qualities that agree with the best knowledge, experiences and wishes of the parties involved.

3. Diversity

DIVERSITY of peoples, religions and languages, considered as a specific feature of the Baltic region, is generally held to be an important, universal value. The Baltic region is a meeting point of four Christian faiths (Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism and Uniatism). The 14 countries around the Baltic Sea are in possession of two civilisations of global relevance: the Western Christian and the Orthodox. The Southeastern sub-
region is also a historical nest of Jewishness. Several minority religions, such as non-conformist Protestant confessions, Karaims, Islam, Armenian Orthodoxy and others are represented alongside the dominating churches. From the point of view of ethnology and linguistics, the historic peoples of the Baltic represent about at least 30 different ethnic groups (immigrants from outside the region not included).

Cultural diversity is a source of ideas, inventions, habits, rituals and arts. Peoples have a right to their views, beliefs and ways of life. These characteristics shall be treated equally; acceptance of cultural diversity is the corner-stone of human rights and democracy. Ethnic cultures enrich the universal human culture, providing it with variety of proposals about how to live and how to solve common problems. Linguists who follow the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis argue that each human language reflects a separate, specific way of thinking, a separate universum. The opposite notions, cultural homogeneity, monoculturality and mono-ethnicity, imply the impoverishment of culture which, similarly to the impoverishment of biological species may lead to the degeneration of societies.

On the other hand, the peoples are also in competition and rivalry with each other. Diversity may then be a source of conflicts. The recent divisions of the BSR – the division between security systems, division between the European Union and the remaining states, between more and less successful market economies and democracies – seem to follow a thesis spread by politologists (Samuel Huntington and his followers), claiming that the superior divisions are in reality located between the dominating global civilisations. In the case of the BSR it affects the so-called West and Orthodoxy. If it can be held as true, constructing a region, situated exactly in-between two opposite systems of values, political and “hard” security structures, acquires a special importance for the parties involved. Junctions or crossroads are namely especially exposed to conflicts, and conflicts between civilisations are considered more serious than these within a civilisation.

Diversity then, is a serious matter; it can enrich the peoples of the Baltic or cause conflicts, even involving parties distant from the region, something which has already happened in history.

4. Rethinking the BSR in cross-disciplinary perspectives

The cross-disciplinary perspective, programmatic for works published by the Baltic University, appoints diverse theoretical patterns of description and analysis. The idea of interdisciplinary studies is to cover the subject as comprehensively as possible, to study and present it as seen from different points of view. Meanwhile, those different perspectives can be too distant from each other and, as a result, incompatible. Thus, some important conclusions need mutual confrontation and comments, especially in cases of inconsistency or contradiction. How, then, do the authors understand their task? Generally, assuming that diversity is the characteristics of the Baltic Sea Region, they have three ways to choose:

• If diversity were the only salient feature of the Baltic Sea Region, the analysis should be driven towards stressing country-, culture- or nation-specific characteristics. In this case the present book would give a survey of, for instance, country and people descriptions.
• Another, opposite way is to search for possible common traits in order to find a more universal, holistic characteristic of the region. A local, Baltic homogeneity is to be assumed and demonstrated.
• The region can also be analysed as a specific case, subordinated to some general rules, held relevant and non self-evident by humanities and social sciences.

The authors have followed these three methods and, moreover, some of them supplied the studies with proposals, projecting a desirable development of the Baltic community. When accepting the functional, ecological BSR as the point of departure, the authors of the textbook took the task of re-interpreting the region in terms of broad defined culture. This work completes the circular, intellectual process of region creation: ecologism and other, more or less practical or political reasons are parts of culture, probably ideologies, which are to be set up back in the frame of culture.

4.1. History has been given a re-valuated role and changed apparatus during the last fifteen-twenty years. Post-modernism has questioned the very meaningfulness of notions comprehended as self-evident some years ago; such central concepts as “the historic process” and “objective development” have lost their previous explanative role. There are only texts which are relevant, history exists in stories and memories, according to the post-modern way of thinking. The changed methodological pattern allows one to see history liberated from national narratives, but it allows also the questioning of the very existence of facts.

The position taken by the author of the first section is a compromise between more traditional methodology and post-modernism. Kristian Gerner delivers a report on the region’s history, assuming that there are objective constraints behind the story telling. When attempting to define the “Baltic identity”, the author follows the second way listed above. Different ethnic histories and views on the same historical issues, treated from a necessary distance, are juxtaposed with each other. Due to this method several events, central to the national histories, appear to have quite opposite symbolic value (cf. interpretations of the Battle of Tannenberg/Grunwald, the treaty of Kiejdany, the Swedish “Deluge” and so on). This is one way of making the particular national narratives compatible. The comparative view also allows one to discover unexpected parallelisms between the particular histories (such as, for instance, the history of Sweden and Poland-Lithuania during the 18th century).

The regional history appears divided in two parts: the earlier, up to the first decades of 18th century, was dominated by quite salient actors: the Vikings, the Hansa and the Swedish empire. These have not been replaced by other, equally dominating powers for the last three hundred years. This thesis finds an extensive illustration in the study on arts by Andrzej Wozinski (in the section on culture).

However, as the collective Baltic history with no ethnic subject does not have its own symbols and values, it cannot be constructed in a similar way to the particular ethnic histories we are used to. The collective history can be referred to the space in between the narratives. This space has been filled by competition, antagonisms and rivalry, but also by trade (the Hansa), long periods of peaceful co-existence, the exchange of people and ideas. Links of co-operation and competition are grounds for networks, which desirably, in the time to integration, create the collective, ethnically composed subject of the Baltic’s own history.

Thus, when analysing the macrohistory of the region, we can see how our local, particular views become inadequate if we try only to understand the past as a common legacy. Ethnic myths behind our particular histories certainly unite us as groups of people but, on the other hand, our myths also deliver maligned images of other people. Revising our own images opens the way towards more freedom; creating a distance to our common history liberates us, or – at least – makes us less prone to being used as a means of ethnic hostilities. This is also the message of sections, dedicated to the multi-ethnic composition of the Baltic countries.
4.2. Our views on history and ethnicity are parts of our culture. Culture determines our mentality and our behaviour; we do not and cannot exist outside of culture. But, what was said about history is also true when speaking more generally on culture. Cultures both unite and divide us, but we are also becoming aware that culture is our human invention. This revelation may also protect us when, provided with moral and intellectual qualities, we find ourselves involved in clashes of cultures. These are experienced every now and again in our more integrated Europe.

Diversity of ethnic cultures in the region seems to confirm the thesis of division between the dominating civilisations, but the authors of sections on culture and language offer a more subtle analysis. Three or four different cultural zones (or sub-regions) are distinguishable with respect to social capital and values declared to be held by the Baltic societies, according to the study of Thorleif Pettersson. Linguistic, religious and political features discriminate the region in a parallel way, in part overlapping the distinctions based upon axiology. The result is that probably the most homogenous sub-region in all respects is Fenno-Scandia, with Finland being a kind of linguistic outsider. The Nordic countries have much in common with the other Germanic-Protestant countries, the Anglo-Saxon world and even Japan, while the societies of the previous Soviet empire are divided into two or three groups, each of them being part of a broader, cultural context, external to the BSR. Poland, which is the most populated country of the BSR, shows itself closer to be Portugal on the “spiritual” and social plane than to its eastern (“Orthodox”) physical neighbours. As seen from the global perspective, the BSR looks rather like a meeting point of extreme European cultural provinces than a part of Europe with its own, local identity. In addition to that, the Baltic network for cultural exchange seems to have quite extensive gaps, as is reported by Bernard Piotrowski. Thus, studies on social capital and traditional-conservative values offer results, which are generally contravenes of the thesis on a culturally united Baltic Sea Region.

The study on languages contributes even more arguments to the statement that the BSR does not form any simple model of cultural unity. The underlying divisions are analysed from the point of view of historical linguistics and from the geographical perspective. The conclusion is that the main, historic communicative communities are sharply isolated from each other. The linguistic diversity of the Region, where more than forty historic languages are spoken, has been alleviated by the extension of English, used as a regional language to an ever increasing extent. The unifying role of this global language, foreign to everybody in the region and therefore relatively free from the function of an ethnic symbol, is matched by a process of diversification on the level of minority languages – both the historic languages in the region and the so-called “home languages”, used by recent immigrants. Special attention is paid to the endangered languages and language planning for the historic minority languages (Kashubian, Karaim, Meänkieli, Romani, Saami, Upper and Lower Sorbian, Yiddish), and support for the “home languages” (the register of these includes more than two hundred and fifty ethnolects). Generally, the status of the minority languages is improving, thanks to official protection.

On the other hand, however, the divisions built on self-expression seem not to correspond to conclusions of reports on democracy, social conditions and economy. In other words, the map of successful transformation of economy and political systems does not exactly overlap the map of divisions built on social capital and declared values. One presumable explanation of this inconsistency might be that the self-expressed awareness of the Baltic peoples does not follow the processes of rapid changes in politics and economy. Apart from that, as stated by some authors, the young generation declares beliefs of higher degrees of adequacy. Thus, the perspective of a culturally united region does not seem to be totally unrealistic, the more so as English is about to become a true lingua franca in the region.
4.3. Political systems with democratic qualities have been built (or reconstructed) in almost all countries around the Baltic Sea, more or less successfully. The democratic institutions in the Southeastern Baltic provinces have generally grown stronger. Current obstacles in building civil societies in the “new democracies” seem to be commented on rather in economical and social terms than in terms of the legacy of communism. Churches and religions have also sought their place in the new reality and developed towards defining themselves as parts of democratic systems.

Analysing deviations seems to be more important today than explaining the grounds of democracy, which is a compulsory subject in the region’s schools. That is why a considerable amount of space has been offered for the description of corruption and malfeasance, i.e. deviations, that erode the people’s confidence in the democratic system. Statistical reports from the BSR indicate a quite visible division between the honest North (with Finland, the “cleanest” country in the world) and the relatively corrupt Southeastern sub-region. Corruption seems to have a long tradition and possibly even forms a kind of negative social capital (the earliest record of corruption known to the author in the Baltic Sea region is Das Marienburger Tresslerbuch der Jahre 1399-1409, published in 1896 by Erick Joachim in Königsberg, reporting bribes paid by the Teutonic Knights during these years). The advanced form of this deviation, the state capture, described by Li Bennich-Björkman, appears when illegal or informal groups interfere in law formation processes in what is ostensibly a democratic country. Precedents of this most dangerous deviation may also be indicated in the history of the BSR – the failure of the Polish-Lithuanian Noble Republic (1569-1795) and the ensuing partitions of the country have been documented and analysed in terms of state capture by Polish historians, possibly without using the very notion.

4.4. The ethnic diversifying of the BSR countries is an ongoing process, caused by integration and migrations. The ethnic, linguistic, religious and social maps of the region have been extensively changed during the postwar period. Countries with generous immigration policies – for instance Sweden – have quite numerous groups of citizens of foreign origin. Some of the newly established Baltic democracies, especially Estonia and Latvia, have inherited their ethnic composition from the not lamented Soviet Union. Poland with its twenty historic minorities, each group being relatively few in number, only recognised in 1990 the very existence of Germans within its borders. Generally, during the years after the fall of the Soviet Union, no serious conflicts, based upon ethnic hostility, have taken room in the region – on the contrary, the Baltic peoples have probably started harmonising their ethnic relations. The legal preconditions for ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities have also been improved. Anti-Semitism has not developed as a factor of political significance either.

The section on minority and majority cultures by Harald Runblom and Hans Ingvar Roth reports on changing relations between majorities and minorities. Tolerance and acceptance, which are the central, traditional key concepts regulating desirable attitudes towards “the others”, seem insufficient today. The European institutions recommend an active protection and support for minorities, as ethnic diversity is being recognised as the richness of Europe. New ideas of multiculturalism, created and implemented originally outside the Baltic region, may change the traditional pattern of majority domination.

Multi-ethnicity is discussed in several chapters throughout the book against a background of other problems. Ethnic frictions in Estonia and Latvia are noted and commented upon in the sections on culture (Michał Buchowski), languages (note the multilingual society by Sven Gustavsson), democracy (Li Bennich-Björkman) and social conditions (Marina Thorborg).
A general conclusion may be that the BSR countries are about to re-define themselves, adopting the model of pluralism and multi-ethnicity instead of the traditional national-state identity. This process brings a newly evaluated view on ethnic histories, recognition of faults and, in several cases, crimes and murders committed during and after WWII. Although the spiritual reconciliation is an ongoing process, not all the nations are ready today to clear their own past.

4.5. Preconditions for the Baltic security community, as projected by Karl Deutsch and the authors of the section on peace and security, have undergone remarkable changes during the last ten years. The development of the entire region has surprised its commentators once again. It has been determined by trends arranged in a predominantly “vertical” way, i.e. in parallel with the East-West axis. The Nordic dimension has been strengthened in respect to the three Baltic republics, especially Estonia. Integration waves have divided the region into new parts in respect to two main organisations:

- The European Union (1. the EU members: Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Finland, 2. the applicants: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and 3. the non-EU members: Belarus and Russia)
- The NATO pact (1. the NATO members: Denmark, Germany, Poland, 2. countries waiting to join: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, 3. the neutral states: Finland and Sweden),

- Belarus and Russia, in union outside the main stream of European integration.

At the present time, developments have brought the improvement of relations between almost all the countries of the Baltic. However, humanities have a low power of predictability, if any at all. Humans are creative and therefore unpredictable; they still bring new inventions, both good and bad and terrible. The terrorist attack against the identity symbols of the United States on September 11th, 2001 changed presumptions of security patterns for the whole world. It would be unrealistic not to hypothesise on the possible consequences for the BSR, as the monitoring of radical fundamentalist movements, drug business, trading in arms and mafia activities is probably about to be much strengthened. Regions with diversified security systems are probably going to be forced to revise their politics in these fields, as neither the existing “hard” security systems nor the “soft” security patterns seem to be able to stop terrorism. The very meaning of the “Nordic Peace” may then also be perceived as inadequate, almost immediately after its emergence. Unfortunately, the superficial thesis on the clash of
civilisations is gaining territory, just because it creates an image of the enemy which is easy to understand, recognise and pick up by the mass media.

4.6. Sections on social conditions and economy are dedicated to problems of general and regional relevance, such as demographical structure, unemployment, education, inequality of the sexes and the integration of European economy. The perspective is concentrated mainly on the ex-communist states and most of the authors represent the Nordic point of view. Both the process of transition as such and the economic theories on it are analysed with a quite moderate depreciation of the dominating doctrine of liberalism.

Economics is a discipline using a language dealing with stochastic processes, and that is why it is overtly similar to sciences. But, on the other hand, its predictions are based upon interpretations of the behaviour of humans. That is why economy is also close to humanities and ideologies. Generally speaking, the economic predictions should be more adequate when referred to stable cultures – in the case of our region – to the Nordic countries, where the reactions are much more predictable than in the countries facing changes which previously had not been experienced at all. Thus, it must be true that receipts on successful transformation offered to the ex-communist countries in the 1990s were based merely on ideology than on experience and, as seen in retrospect, were defective.

According to the view presented by Hans Aage that run contradictory to broadly asserted opinions, communism did not so much collapse because of its own inefficiency, rather it was dismantled. Faith in liberalism and private activity, steering the transition, may have even resulted in the fact that about 30% of population in ex-communist countries lives below the poverty line.

The new poverty and social segregation in the Nordic countries, on the other hand, seem to have quite different origins. The phenomenon is mainly restricted to immigrants, as referred by statistical reports. From an anthropologist’s point of view, unemployment is, at least in part, caused by a pattern of thinking, laying the ground for the social and cultural isolation of immigrants. According to this, individual peoples are primarily seen as representatives of foreign, monolithic cultures which are, in agreement with current political correctness, to be supported and preserved (for details see Michał Buchowski’s chapter on culture).

This reasoning may probably be extrapolated and implemented in the discussion on barriers preventing enlargement of the European Union. Popular support for enlargement has declined gradually during recent years, both in the united Europe and in countries waiting to join, and this is reflected in the current political debate. As reported by Hans Aage, besides the economic and legal matters, one of the central fears concerns the future of the Union after enlargement. Social...
and cultural discrepancies are comprehended as a potential source of conflicts that may – on the one hand – lead to an undesirable political strengthening of the Union, and or – on the other hand – show themselves too difficult to be handled on a civilised way. In both cases the ethnic cultures seem to be comprehended as monolithic and unchangeable, something which corresponds neither to European experiences, nor to the declared high valuation of ethnic diversity (cf. section on multi-ethnicity in this volume).

Culture-based presumptions are also reasons for economic inequality between the sexes and, according to Ingegard Municio, also judicial inequality, incorporated in general constraints, defining citizenship. Extensive differences between the Nordic and the south-eastern sub-regions are to be observed regarding the economic, social and political position of women.

The demographical development, analysed by Marina Thorborg and Gaiane Safarova is generally characterised by increasing life expectancy and decreasing fertility rates, combined with falling infant mortality. Declines in natural changes are mitigated by immigration to some countries, although the general tendency of population decrease is becoming more and more visible as in 2000 this also included Poland which, besides Denmark, Finland and Sweden had had small positive rates of natural population increase for the previous years. Several regions of north-western Russia are reported to face an unprecedented process of depopulation.

The environment of the region is the object of main concern of several courses offered by the Baltic University Programme. The present volume includes a rather optimistic report by Hans Aage, stating improvement in this area.

The social and economic problems of the region are identified however, diagnosis and cures, suggested by the authors, seem to come apart in two directions: the first, stressing the role of the state and the social infrastructure, and the second, preferring individual, private activity. The contradiction reflects a more global, ideologically based controversy that is not to be solved in this volume (and, hopefully, not in others either).

5. Ground zero?

During its history the region has been divided innumerable times by peoples claiming their right to territories. All the countries have changed their territorial shapes, political and social systems, they have fought each other or collaborated, some of them disappeared, and some reappeared again. The development became quite rapid after 1989. The fall of the Soviet empire, emancipation of former Soviet satellites, the rise of new states, reunification of Germany were events that transformed the Baltic world.

The status quo created during the last twelve years is generally treated as new and unprecedented. The pressure of topicality and concentration on political issues means however, that a retrospective look on the Baltic may bring some surprises. The movements of the Baltic peoples and their countries during the 20th century seem to be governed by a gradual drifting – unaware in part at least – “back” to the very old, prehistoric “homes”. Namely, the contemporary divisions cover approximately the map of main ethnic and linguistic divisions in 600, i.e. the status quo after the Great Migration (compare the status of years 600, 1914, 1937, 1945, 1991).

Today most of the main tribes are back in their old sites. Does the history of our presence at the Baltic Sea end as a territorial zero-sum game? Are we conveyed by our ethno-centrism in a much higher degree than we dare to admit? Is culture that we have invented a cover for something else? Is the presented idea of a free, peaceful and harmonious region, created
by good neighbours, a new Utopia? However utopias, if implemented, change reality. The answer may come in some ten years. A new textbook on the Peoples of the Baltic should be needed at that time.