

### The Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area: two pieces of the same puzzle

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**Tiziana Melchiorre**

**THE BALTIC SEA REGION  
AND THE BLACK SEA AREA:  
TWO PIECES  
OF THE SAME PUZZLE**

*The Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area are overlapping regions that have their own political, historical and cultural peculiarities. They belong to the same geopolitical system, within which they are developing two regional cooperation subsystems strongly influenced both by internal political and economic dynamics and by external actors. The aim of this research is to analyse the political and economic factors that influence the cooperation in the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area by means of comparative approach, which will help to determine the similarities and differences necessary to give an overview of two strategic areas in the European context.*

**Key words:** Baltic Sea region, Black Sea area, regional cooperation, EU, NATO, BSEC, CBSS.

## **Introduction**

The Cold War assured a period of stability and peace. The bipolar system divided the world in two blocks opposing each other where there was no place for military conflicts in Europe. When the Cold War ended, the new international situation led to the eruption of the tensions among and within the states which had been stifled until then. The result was what Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver define “new world disorder” [3, p.3], which is essentially based on regions defined by the two researchers as “groups of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another” [16, p. 6]. Therefore, “this security interdependence results in a region becoming a ‘security complex’” [16, p. 6].

Oleksandr Pavliuk shares Buzan’s and Ole’s view in stating that the end of the Cold War “made security more dispersed and fragmented” [16, p. 3] and that, consequently, “global security became regionalized: it acquired a regional dimension, which for decades had been suppressed and subordinated to the bipolar conflict” [16, p. 3]. The reason for this was that the bipolar system was based on two more or less equally strong super powers balancing each other [14, p. 14].

In effect, researchers unanimously agree that one of the products of the structural changes brought about by the end of the Cold War in the international system is regionalization characterized by the fact that cooperation in one or more sectors is the basis of the relationship among the regional states. This phenomenon has been and is still very much studied because it has relevant geopolitical implications and economic and social consequences. The region – building process in the Baltic Sea region and in the Black Sea area is a useful example to study in this context. As researchers point out these two areas have a great importance in the European geopolitical system because their geographical location ensure easy access to strategic energy resources which are of great interest for the European powers.

This scenario offers a special place to the presence of regional organizations such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC). In fact, as many studies stress, these organizations play a fundamental role in the effort to strengthen regional cooperation in the two areas having a strong impact on the relations between the countries of each area as well as on the international system as a whole.

The present article is an attempt to fill in this gap, in the academic field, due to the fact that very little comparative research has been carried out on the two regions. The purpose is to give an overview of the regional dynamics in the two areas through a comparative approach which stresses the similarities and the differences between the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area. In fact, despite historical, geographical, political and economic features make them very different, some relevant similarities can be identified.

In this article I argue that the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area belong to the same geopolitical system not only because their geographical location makes them part of the same continent but also and especially because they can be considered as two aspects of the same story, namely regional cooperation in North – Eastern Europe, with some crucial internal and external factors uniting them as it will be showed below.

This article is divided in three parts. The first one, which analyses the similarities and the differences between the two regions, identifies the main historical, geographical and political aspects characterizing them. The second part focuses on the development of the phenomenon of regional cooperation in the

Baltic and the Black Sea areas trying to stress the differences in the internal dynamics of the two regions. The third part completes the overview by including in the picture the geopolitical factors external to the regions but crucial in order to fully understand the regional dynamics inserted in a broader context.

### **Difference versus togetherness**

The Baltic Sea and the Black Sea are strategic areas in mainly two aspects. Firstly, the sea itself is historically crucial as it facilitates the links between peoples. Secondly, the special geographical location of the Baltic and the Black Sea has made them commercially and militarily very important over time. For example, the Hanseatic League, which included up to 100 towns between the 15<sup>th</sup> XIV and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, was based on a “network of cities” [19, p.9] with the aim of establishing a trade exchange and cooperation in the Baltic Sea area. Similarly, in the Ottoman Empire, towns were the “centres of commerce” [18, p.42] whose trade was very flourishing. Later, in the Soviet era new ports were established on the shores of the two seas in order to reinforce both the military and the commercial capabilities of the Soviet Union. Today, while these two areas have kept their commercial relevance, the Black Sea region is more important than the Baltic Sea area from the military point of view. Of course, in this context the energy issue must not be undervalued as it has geopolitical and economic implications both in the Baltic Sea region and in the Black Sea area. Thirdly, both areas include Russia and some of the countries which constituted the Soviet Union: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Baltic Sea region and Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia in the Black Sea region. Russia, also a successor of URSS, belongs to both regions. This third element is crucial in order to understand not only the strategic importance of the two areas, but also the regional dynamics regulating the relationship among the countries in each region.

Despite these similarities the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area are very different. The first differential element is geography which can even represent a common element in general terms as shown above. In effect, the Baltic Sea region is situated in the North of Europe, which means that the countries belonging to the area are outlying as they are very near to the North Pole. However, this factor does not decrease their importance as this area is full of resources like oil, which has recently unleashed a very tough competition among the powers coasting the North Pole (e.g. Norway, Denmark and Russia) especially since the melting of glaciers is making the exploitation of local resources and of commercial routes much more accessible [4, p. 50]. Instead, the Black Sea area is in a very peculiar geographical position as it is situated between two continents, Europe and Asia. In fact, two of the states of the area, namely Russia and Turkey, have their territory located both in Europe and in Asia. This element is particularly relevant as it increases the strategic importance of the Black Sea area not only because it is involved in the geopolitics of two continents, but also because one of the countries of the region, namely Turkey, borders on the Middle East, which is a very sensitive area. Of course, like in the case of the Baltic Sea region, the resources issue is fundamental in the geopolitics of the area especially for the pipeline system which influences the relations among the Black Sea countries, Russia and Turkey in particular [11, p. 540].

The second differential element making the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area very different concerns the nature of the relationships among the countries of the two areas. This means that while the relationships among the countries belonging to the Baltic Sea region are essentially based on peace and friendship despite many conflicts have characterized their history, the relationships among the Black Sea area are characterized by conflicts and tensions.

A very singular interpretation of the tensions which have characterized the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area over time is given by Viktor Sergeyev. He argues that there are “stable conflict systems” along the “Ponto – Baltic zone” [17, p. 21], which he defines as the “line going from the Gulf of Riga through the swamps of Belarus and farther south along the Carpathian foothills down to the Black Sea” [17, p. 22]. He argues that the territories touched by this line have always been characterized by conflicts and tensions due to several factors combined together, namely geography, geostrategic policies, ethnicity, economy and culture [17, p. 21]. Sergeyev states that the existence of the *Ponto – Baltic Conflict System* can be analysed from two different perspectives. On the one hand, the point of view of Russia stresses the willingness of the great power to exert its influence on neighbours in order to have a “window on Europe” [17, p. 24]. On the other hand, there are countries bordering Russia which are afraid of the aggressive intentions of their neighbour that wants to suppress and to control them.

Nevertheless, as stated above, the tensions and the conflicts characterizing the Black Sea area are deeper than the ones in the Baltic Sea region because of historical, political, economic and cultural

factors. This will be analysed later. What is important to stress here is that the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area belong to the same geopolitical system as Sergeyev's interpretation suggests.

### **Regional cooperation: marriage or cohabitation?**

In the previous paragraph it has been shown that the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area can be considered as two faces of the same story not so much because of their similarities (their differences are actually much more relevant) but because they have a very powerful neighbour in common, namely Russia. In this second part of the article the peculiar features of the two regions will be analysed in order to give an overview of the complexity of the regional dynamics in the two areas.

As already stated in the Introduction, regional cooperation is the answer to the new international situation brought about by the end of the Cold War when insecurity and uncertainty dominated the international arena. In this context regional organizations play a crucial role in order to face the enormous effort cooperation requires. In fact, regional organizations give a structure and essential guidelines to the cooperation in the area in which they act. This is why a wide framework of organizations has been established both in the Baltic Sea region and in the Black Sea area. Nevertheless, in this paper only two organizations will be analysed, namely the CBSS for the Baltic Sea region and the BSEC for the Black Sea area. The reason is that the CBSS and the BSEC are the most representative organizations of the two regions because they are among the first answers the countries belonging to them have given to the new threats and challenges they had to face. In fact, both were established in 1992 as a result of the influence of different forces. In the case of the CBSS the aim was to encourage and coordinate the cooperation among the Baltic countries in several factors like trade, environment, culture, and so on. In the case of the BSEC the aim was to foster the economic interaction among its members in order to promote peace and stability in the Black Sea region. Of course, during the time the cooperation has expanded and today it includes many sectors in both regions. Nevertheless, the establishment of the CBSS and of the BSEC was also due to geopolitical reasons. For example, among the reason at the base of the establishment of the CBSS there was also the willingness of the countries of the area to include Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania actively in the cooperation within the area, but also to push the democratization and modernization processes forward in these three countries, that had been under the Soviet rule for long time. Another reason was that including Russia in the effort to cooperate meant to increase the security of the area. In the case of the BSEC its establishment was the product of the initiative of Turkey that is particularly interested in the developing pipeline system in the area. Of course Russia is attracted very much by the oil opportunities the region offers, too. Suat Kiniklioğlu and Valeriy Morkva explain that "the energy dimension constitutes the most significant aspect of the Turkish – Russian relationship" [11 p. 540]. The Blue Stream natural gas pipeline project is the most sensitive issue in the relations between the two states not only because of its economic implications but also because of the environmental risks for Turkey [11, p. 541].

Moreover, it is very interesting to note the different statements the two organizations use to present themselves and their work. The CBSS states that its role is "is to serve as a forum for guidance and overall coordination among the participating states" [23]. Instead, the BSEC states that "it came into existence as a unique and promising model of multilateral political and economic initiative aimed at fostering interaction and harmony among the Member States, as well as to ensure peace, stability and prosperity encouraging friendly and good-neighbourly relations in the Black Sea region" [22]. The different ways in which the two statements are formulated show a substantial difference between regional cooperation in the two areas. The starting point is different. In fact, in the Baltic Sea region the problem is not so much the peace among the countries of the area, but the coordination of the activities in several sectors. Instead, in the case of the BSEC the idea is to ameliorate the relationships among the countries of the region which are constantly threatened by ethnic conflicts on the one hand and by the competition among the great powers of the area to control natural resources and especially oil on the other one. Of course some tensions exist also in the Baltic Sea region, in particular between the three Baltic States and Russia for historical and political reasons as well as for the Russian diaspora. However, in the Baltic Sea region there are not any open conflicts such as the ones existing between Armenia and Azerbaijan for the control of Nagorno – Karabakh or more recently between Russia and Georgia.

In this context the GUAM organization in the Black Sea region is particularly significant because it can help to explain the internal dynamics of the region. GUAM is a regional organization founded in

2001 by four former Soviet states, namely Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova<sup>1</sup>, which decided not to join the Community of Independent States (CIS). GUAM is another source of tensions in the Black Sea region essentially for two reasons. The first one is the mistrust of Russia towards the organization because it has always seen the initiative as threatening its interests in the area. The second reason is that GUAM's energy projects could be seen by the BSEC as competing with its policy in this sector [16, p. 49].

Furthermore, the BSEC is particularly important in Russia's policy in the region. In fact, the BSEC serves Russian interests in promoting good relations among the regional countries in order to enhance the cooperation in the area, especially in the economic field. To this aim Russia has established the Russian National Committee for the Black Sea Economic Cooperation in order to coordinate and strengthen the participation of Russian entrepreneurs in the BSEC [19, p. 173].

Thus, the complexity of the Black Sea region due to politics, economic interests, ethnical and historical factors makes regional cooperation in this area more complicated than in the Baltic Sea region. All these elements are useful in order to understand the difference in the approach of the countries of the two areas to the issue of regional identity which is strictly connected to the definition of the regional boundaries. In both cases the regional boundaries are quite vague. In fact, researchers disagree on the definition of the borders of the two regions because they refer to different historical, cultural and political perspectives. In the case of the Baltic Sea region, for example, some researchers like Olav F. Knudsen refer to the Baltic Sea Region as comprising "all littoral states of that sea"[12, p.1]. At the same time Knudsen uses the term *Nordic-Baltic region* to "designate the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) plus the three Baltic states [Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania]" [12, p.1]. Some other researchers such as Annika Bergman identify Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden as Nordic states and use the term Baltic countries to indicate the three Baltic Republics, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania [2, p. 73]. Thus, despite a shared definition of the Baltic Sea region does not exist, it is possible to state that researchers usually tend to include the littoral states in the Baltic Sea region, explaining the dynamics characterizing the area not only on the basis of their cultural, political and historical point of view, but also by taking into consideration the geopolitics of all the territories on the Baltic Sea.

In the case of the Black Sea region it is even more complicated to define its boundaries which "vary from including the six Black Sea littoral states (Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine) to the eleven [twelve at the moment] countries that are members of the region's largest cooperative framework – the organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) to an even larger area, given that several more countries have already applied or are considering applying for membership in BSEC" [16, p. 7].

Some researchers even doubt that the Black Sea area can be considered a region. They argue that it is not perceived as a region neither from the outside by the international community nor from the inside by the countries belonging to the area [1, p. 57]. Some experts define the Black Sea area as an "intellectually constructed region" [1, p. 59] stating that it has a weak identity finding the causes both in the discrepancies among the regional countries in economic, political, social and cultural aspects and in the little importance the Black Sea area has in their international strategies [1, p. 59].

Consequently, despite the fact that many researchers agree that regions are 'imagined communities', it is possible to argue that the Baltic Sea region is recognized as such both from the outside and from the inside in spite of the difficulty of defining it. By contrast, the geopolitical, economic, historical and cultural complexity of the Black Sea area, which makes the regional – building process quite complicated, prevents the countries involved from developing a neat regional identity.

### **Geopolitics solves the puzzle**

The development of regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea region and in the Black Sea area is the answer to a revolutionary structural change in the international context. Political, economic, historical and cultural factors influence the region – building process as it has been shown above. Geopolitics is also a crucial element at stake in this process as it involves international actors, namely the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which play a fundamental role in defining the political and economic priorities in the two regions as well as in the relationships among the regional countries themselves.

It is very interesting to note that both the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area include countries that are members of the EU and of NATO and countries that are not. The same is true of the CBSS and of

<sup>1</sup> In 1999 Uzbekistan entered the organization which became GUUAM, but it withdrew in 2002.

the BSEC but, while the former counts also the European Commission (EC) among its members, the BSEC counts the EU among its observers. These are very important elements to take into consideration in order to analyse both the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area because they have important implications for the geopolitical dynamics not only within the two regions, but also in the international context as a whole.

The EU and NATO are deeply involved in the affairs of the two regions especially since their enlargement, as some of the states that were part of the Soviet Union have been included in the Western institutions. Consequently, the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area constitute very important links among the actors that formerly belonged to one or the other of the two historically opposing blocks. Also, the EU membership has radically changed the European political geography because the EU now borders on Russia.

Thus if, on the one hand, the EU has had to make important modifications within its institutions and their rules in order to face the challenges imposed by an enlarged Union, on the other hand its attitude towards the two regions has changed since the end of the Cold War and its enlargement in particular.

It is in the interests of the European Union to have a stable and prosperous neighbourhood. This is the reason why the EU has always promoted regional cooperation in the two areas. In addition, its involvement in the two region's affairs is crucial because the EU has a very important role to play to promote democracy and economic developments in those areas. Of course the presence of Russia in the Baltic Sea region and in the Black Sea area is of vital interest to the EU as well as for NATO for three reasons. Firstly, Russia is a strategic partner both for the EU and for the Atlantic Alliance. Russia, whose relationship with the EU is regulated by the 'Strategic Partnership' covering the so called four "common spaces"<sup>2</sup>, is the EU's biggest partner especially in the energy sector. Russia is strategically important also for NATO as it cooperates with the 28 Allies on an equal basis within the NATO – Russia Council (NRC) established in 2002. Secondly, Russia is a member of the BSEC and of the CBSS guiding the regional cooperation in the two areas. Thirdly, Russia is still a great power with strong interests not only in Europe but also in the Middle East.

Despite the fact that the EU and NATO have established a close cooperation with Russia their relationship with the strategic partner is not always easy. For example, tensions between Russia and the EU arose in the crises between Russia and Ukraine in 2004 and between Russia and Georgia in 2003 and later in 2008 as well as between Russia and Estonia (an EU and NATO member) in 2007. Furthermore, Ukraine and Georgia as well as Azerbaijan have clearly expressed their willingness to enter both NATO and the EU.

Another factor that should not be forgotten in this context is the relationship between Russia and Turkey already mentioned in the previous paragraph. Despite the fact that "the Russians "are not quite sure to what degree a NATO member country can be trusted" [11, p. 537] and despite Russia is not very enthusiastic about the eventual future Turkish membership of the EU because this would limit the room for manoeuvre in the Russian – Turkish relationship, Russia increasingly sees Turkey as a 'friendly actor' in the area [11, p. 537].

Renata Dwan points out that the perspective of joining the EU and NATO is a strong motivation at the base of the cooperation among states in Central and Eastern Europe in order to strengthen their efforts to acquire the EU and NATO membership as soon as possible. However, Renata Dwan notes that, at the same time, the pursuit of these two memberships can in some cases prevent states from cooperating with other countries. The reason is that they do not want to give the impression that they would be satisfied also with regional arrangements other than with the EU and NATO membership [6, p.4]. In effect, this is the case especially in the Black Sea area while regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea region has always been more spontaneous for historical and cultural reasons, but also because ethnic conflicts are absent in this area with the exception of the Russian diaspora.

In addition, another important consideration must be done. Both the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area are inserted in broader policies of the EU, namely the Northern Dimension (ND) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). While the ND includes Russia as an important actor in the area the ENP does not. The reason is that the ND was launched by the Finnish Prime Minister Lipponen in 1997 not only to create a Northern issue within the EU and to bring the three Baltic States closer to the EU but also to increase the cooperation between the EU and Russia (particularly North – West Russia) [8, p.7]. The ENP was developed in 2004 "with the objective of avoiding the emergence of new dividing

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<sup>2</sup> The four policy areas concern economic issues & the environment; Freedom, Security & Justice; External Security; and Research & Education. [http://ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/russia/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/russia/index_en.htm)

lines between the enlarged EU and our neighbours and instead strengthening the prosperity, stability and security of all concerned” [21]. The EU has not included Russia in the ENP because their relations are developed on a separate basis as stated above. Of course Russia has a crucial role to play both in the ND and in the ENP because of its geopolitical and economic weight in the international context.

The other external actor, namely NATO, has developed bilateral relationships with the countries of the two areas. Some of the Baltic and of the Black Sea countries are NATO members; most of them participate in NATO activities such as the Partnership for Peace (PfP) while Russia and Ukraine<sup>3</sup> are NATO’s strategic partners. The role of NATO in the region is relevant not only for the reasons explained above, but also because it represents the hard –security option for the Baltic and Black Sea countries.

## Conclusion

The Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area are overlapping regions. Both of them include Russia, which is one of the largest and most important actors in the two regions, and include ex – Soviet states. Also, both of them are strategic areas for the EU and for NATO because of several reasons: the presence of Russia, energy and the fact that they include the EU and NATO members explain the strong interest of the external actors (EU and NATO) in the two regions. Russia is also a strategic partner for the regional countries not only for historical and security reasons but also because it is a key exporter in the energy field. This is the factor fostering tensions between Russia and Norway in the Baltic Sea region (considered as an area including the Baltic and the Nordic states as well) and between Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea area.

In addition, both the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area are developing regional cooperation in order to answer the insecurity brought about by the enormous changes occurred since the end of the Cold War. The interdependence among nation states enormously increased and, consequently, the region – building process and regional cooperation appear to be an efficient instrument to increase security and stability in the international context.

In this process, the establishment of regional organizations is crucial because they create a framework within which regional cooperation can develop according to certain rules. In this way regional organizations facilitate the region – building process and, consequently, the definition of the boundaries of the region. Of course, this is not a simple process and it is often not easy to identify the borders of a region such as in the case of the Baltic Sea region and of the Black Sea area as explained above. In spite of this, regional organizations like the CBSS and the BSEC play a fundamental role in the two regions because they increase the dialogue among the regional actors and between the latter and external actors like the EU and NATO.

It is evident that the Baltic Sea region and the Black Sea area are very different not only because of their geographical location which has important geopolitical implications, but also because they have a different history as well as different political, economic and cultural features. Of course, every country has its own political, economic and cultural peculiarities even within each of the two regions but, while these differences do not foster conflicts in the Baltic Sea region, they are often the cause of dangerous tensions in the Black Sea area.

In this context, the EU and NATO try to push the actors of the two regions to increase regional cooperation in order to create more political, economic and social interdependence among them. The aim is to create prosperous and stable regions. To this aim the EU has developed a programme called “Black Sea Synergy” whose objective is not “to propose an independent Black Sea strategy since the broad EU policy towards the region is already set out in the pre-accession strategy with Turkey, the ENP and the Strategic Partnership with Russia” [5, p.3] but to propose “an initiative complementary to these policies that would focus political attention at the regional level and invigorate ongoing cooperation processes” [5, p.3]. In addition, in 2009 the EU has adopted a Communication with the aim of “coordinating action by Member States, regions, the EU, pan-Baltic organisations, financing institutions and non-governmental bodies to promote a more balanced development of the Region” [21].

In spite of these important initiatives the EU, as well as NATO, should increase its efforts in the area in order to accelerate the stability process in the two regions and especially in the Black Sea area where the tensions among the regional countries are increasingly worsening as a product of the dominos effect unleashed by the end of the Cold War.

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<sup>3</sup> The Ukraine –NATO relations are regulated by the 1997 Charter on a Distinctive Partnership.

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