

The Baltic-Black Sea Connection

A Region in the Making or a Political Project?

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Russia's border with its immediate European neighbors is shaped through a variety of transborder initiatives, each of which has its own region-building potential. These initiatives lack a single source. Transborder region-building projects sometimes result from European Union policy (as in the case of the Northern Dimension), sometimes are conceived by a non-EU country (as with Norway and its Barents-Euroarctic project), and sometimes are stimulated from outside Europe (as with the United States and the Northern European Initiative). The general question under consideration is the way political space in the immediate vicinity of Russia's western borders is being reinvented. The Baltic-Black Sea Region (BBSR) is one such section in the chain of region-building initiatives directly affecting Russia.

Common to all these regional projects is their aim to define the margins of Europe-Russia. The process stitches together different practices of transborder communication. Projects create zones of close interaction between the regional actors involved. They are intellectual products based upon creativity and innovative thinking. Projects produce new modes of conduct, as well as common understandings that reshape what transborder space is. They project certain norms, principles, and values onto a specific territorial ground. This understanding becomes part of leadership communication and reinforces itself as a result.

The BBSR is a peculiar type of region in the making for a number of reasons. First, it is an example of a project understood in different ways by key actors. At least two different region-building subjects can be singled out at first glance. Predominantly, the BBSR is viewed as a U.S.-inspired project. Indeed, it was the United States that stood behind a series of earlier initiatives that laid the foundation for a Baltic–Black Sea connection. This included the organization GUAM (Georgia–Ukraine–Azerbaijan–Moldova, and, for a time, Uzbekistan) in the beginning of the 1990s, and the efforts of the three Baltic countries to share their experiences (primarily in the security field) with the much more problematic and vulnerable Caucasian states. U.S. policy towards the BBSR is part of an endeavor by the United States to stimulate the creation of a New Europe as a separate and rapidly growing segment of the European political landscape. The BBSR’s development can also be viewed as rooted in New Europe’s rising geopolitical self-assertiveness, mainly vis-à-vis Russia.

Yet under closer scrutiny, it is clear that the EU is also involved (though more indirectly) in molding the BBSR. Having agreed to open the process for accession negotiations with Turkey in October 2005, the EU acknowledged the increasing importance of the Black Sea area in its enlargement strategy.

The EU, certainly, has its own vision of the future of the BBSR manifested through a variety of region-building initiatives, with the European Neighborhood Policy at their core. Presumably, this vision is based upon the EU policy of creating a friendly area of proximity consisting of geographically adjacent countries that are supposed to share basic European values. Neither of the EU-promoted policies in this region contradicts the political logic embedded in the joint Ukrainian-Georgian statement that heralded the formation of the BBSR.

Despite some operational divergences between Washington (which is concentrated mainly on the security dimension of the region-building project) and Brussels (which is focused basically on projecting European norms and values), the BBSR could nevertheless be interpreted as the site of a U.S.–EU joint venture, although they play different roles. In this sense, the BBSR draws upon an earlier Nordic–Baltic Sea region-building process that also became an example of overlapping region-building initiatives, given that the geographical area of the EU-sponsored Northern Dimension coincided with the U.S.-promoted Northern European Initiative. These two vectors of the BBSR seem to be, as in the case of Nordic–Baltic Sea regionalism, complementary and mutually reinforcing.

However, there is another source of the emergence of the BBSR. Paradoxically, it is Russia that also contributes in its own peculiar way to the appearance of the BBSR.

Russia has an interest in dividing the BBSR liaison both politically and rhetorically. Moreover, Russia has vast experience in dividing its neighbors and tackling them separately. Lithuania, as the closest Russian partner among the three Baltic states, is usually contrasted with the more unfriendly Latvia and Estonia; Finland, being the most trustful of Russia's interlocutors in the Northern Europe, can be contrasted to Denmark; while basically pro-Russian Armenia is pictured much more positively than allegedly pro-American Georgia.

However, this logic does not seem to work in the case of the BBSR. Most Russian experts and opinion makers do exactly the opposite: they not only acknowledge the existence of the BBSR but, of greater note, make use of it as a basis for subsequent reflections. It could even be posited that Russia badly needs the imagined BBSR in order to corroborate some of its key foreign policy assumptions. Instead of trying to dent the coherence and cohesiveness of this imagined entity and, therefore, to avoid a frontal collision with a group of its neighbors, Russia prefers to use this region-building project as a means of defining itself vis-à-vis (and opposed to) an allegedly unfriendly New Europe. The BBSR could serve as a new adversary for Russia and be pragmatically utilized for nourishing Russian nationalist feelings.

Secondly, the BBSR-building process is an obvious example of a highly political project. It is clearly state-centric, yet transgresses obvious geopolitical categories. The whole idea of a region comprising territories between two distant seas arises from a new wave of post-Soviet democracies, made apparent in the drastic changes of political regimes in Ukraine and Georgia. Political logic dominates and undergirds the very existence of the BBSR.

Again, it must be noted that Russia accepts this political logic in its own way, namely by deploying the BBSR in a framework that claims there is a false and a true Europe. False Europe, as understood by some Russian policymakers, by and large corresponds to the BBSR area and includes countries with strong anti-Russian sentiments and those that have lost genuine European values. The true Europe is thus populated by nations that are friendly to Russia and have adhered to what Russia considers the original spirit of Europe. Telling is the logical nexus between the two parameters in the Russian vision of the true-false dichotomy. Presumably, it is the evaporation of the national spirit that leads some European countries to Russia's blacklist. Countries are placed in the false category exactly because they have deviated from what Russia treats as the European mainstream. By articulating the idea of false Europe, Russia tries not only to exhibit its own European identity but also to identify its own circle of friends.

Thirdly, as a political project, the BBSR is not a project that eliminates borders, which makes it quite distinctive from, for example, the Northern

Dimension. The political nature of the BBSR turns it into a regional instrument to modify and relocate East-West borders. It obviously does not suit Russia, which in the long run faces the possibility of being excluded from the EU and Europe, or pushed to their periphery.

The shaping of EU-Russia borders should be understood in light of the different degrees of efficacy and practicability among the series of transborder and region-building projects. In this sense, the building of regions is a politically neutral device, since it can be used for border-drawing and for border-unmaking, and in state-centric relations as well as horizontally-networked relations.

The BBSR region is a political project of players with multiple and, therefore, varying purposes. The United States exemplifies an actor-driven influence, though it does not always seem to be eager to publicly sponsor this initiative. The EU, for its part, provides an example of structural influence, propagating norms and values compatible with the spirit of Europeanization. Russia is an influence by opposition. To a significant extent, Moscow needs the Baltic-Black Sea nexus in order to be properly equipped with an argument pointing to the alleged U.S. policy of encircling Russia and undermining its influence in the post-Soviet area. The BBSR appears to be a perfect example of false Europe for Russia. This false Europe is: a) eager to relinquish its sovereignty for security gains (expressed basically in geopolitical terms), b) desirous of more strictly formalizing EU principles and applying them to Russia, and c) reluctant to accept Russian claims of exceptionalism. Russia appears to challenge the geopolitical content of the BBSR initiative and devalue it, while accepting the *de facto* existence of the region.

Russia could try an alternative approach, namely one of questioning the very essence of regional integration in an area that is extremely variegated in political, cultural, and social terms. This would require a different approach and a more sophisticated strategy of public communication with individual countries like Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus. Meanwhile, the question of how zones of overlapping EU-Russian margins will be managed remains intriguingly open.