

## THE MODEL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION: POLITICAL SHIFTS AND CURRENT CHALLENGES

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*The demise of the USSR and the revision of the Yalta-Potsdam system of international relations led to tectonic changes in the Baltic Sea region: it became apparent that the northern flank, once the most likely battleground between the North Atlantic Alliance and the Warsaw Pact, had a historical opportunity to transform into a region of intensive political, economic, educational and cultural interaction. Under these circumstances, the construction of a new regional system of international relations unfolded at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. This article examines the evolution of the regional model of international relations, from a ‘cohesion region’ to a modern ‘conflict region’, through the analysis of the dynamics of regional cooperation networks amidst the crisis in the international system and politics. The study builds on the tradition of historical and political analysis of regions as agents in the international relations system, drawing on relevant documents and materials from international organisations, foreign ministries and other authorities of the Baltic Sea region states. The final part of the research emphasises the need for experts to search for a post-conflict regional agenda, with some proposals outlined.*

### Keywords:

Russia, Baltic Sea region, NATO, European Union, regional networks, political dynamics

### Research field. Statement of the problem

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The study uses the concept of ‘the Baltic Sea region’ in its established modern international political understanding.<sup>1</sup> The study leaves out rather intensive discussions of scientists on different approaches to the essence of the concept of ‘region’, the definition of the Baltic Sea region’s borders, and the grounds for including certain states or territories into the Baltic Sea region (see [1; 2]).

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<sup>1</sup> The region around the Baltic Sea was formed by the countries that are members of the Council of the Baltic Sea States at the beginning of 2022 (excluding observer countries).

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The regional system of international relations is understood as a set of specific interactions between the countries of the region, which are based on common regional-geographical and political-economic affiliation. The author proceeds from the understanding that in the Baltic Sea region at the turn of the XX and XXI centuries, as well as at the present stage, the intensity and nature of interstate interaction were determined by global processes: overcoming the experience of inter-bloc confrontation (the Cold War) and the attempt to build a 'global world' on co-operative principles.

The modern regional model of international relations was formed at the turn of the XX and XXI centuries: the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics demised, the Warsaw Pact Organisation dissolved, Germany was united, and independent Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia reappeared on the political map of the world. The formation of a new model of interstate interactions in the region was based on the construction of various cooperation networks of public organisations and state institutions, participation in which implied the recognition of common goals and the use of common practices of interaction at the international level. A landmark event in this context was the Copenhagen Declaration on the establishment of the Council of the Baltic Sea States in 1992 to strengthen cooperation and coordination among the Baltic Sea region states as a 'region of cohesion'.<sup>1</sup>

The author formulated the following research task: to trace the development of regional cooperation networks as one of the elements determining the dynamics of the model of international relations in the Baltic Sea region at the present stage. The subject of this study is the evolution of the regional model of international relations, and it aims to show the transition of the model of 'region of cohesion' to 'region of confrontation' on the example of cooperation networks and to outline the need for academic and expert discussion on the formation of a post-conflict regional agenda. The research is based on the traditions of historical and political analysis of regions as subjects of the system of international relations. The analysis uses an array of relevant documents and materials of regional organisations, statements and policy documents of foreign policy departments and other state authorities of the Baltic Sea region countries.

### **Experience in research on the regional model of international relations**

The radical restructuring of the world political system of the early 1990s had as one of its manifestations the formation and increasing subjectivity of regional systems of international relations as political systems characterised by the dynamics of interactions within their spatial and political boundaries. This process required reflection in theoretical approaches to the study of world politics and international relations: in the studies of the last decade of the last century, the

<sup>1</sup> Copenhagen Declaration. 1992, *Council of the Baltic Sea States*, 5–6 March 1992, URL: <https://cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/1992-CBSS-1st-Ministerial-Session-Communique.pdf> (accessed 28.07.2024).

regional level of international relations as a separate level of analysis already appeared (see, for example, Voskresensky's review of the problems of research practices and applied methods [3]).

International processes in the Baltic Sea region have become a popular object of study in Russia and the countries of the region. The research interest was largely determined by the fact that the regional model of international relations at the turn of the XX and XXI centuries became the subject of political engineering, expressed in the intensive formation of regional cooperation networks (establishment of regional organisations of interstate nature, creation of projects and initiatives of regional scale) in the conditions of rapid development of trade and economic relations between the countries of the region.

A key feature of regional cooperation networks is that they are created by states or with the direct support of public authorities: the scope of activities, tools and powers are defined by the founders in a coordinated way. Strengthening the role of regional cooperation networks is possible with a coordinated decision of the founders to delegate certain powers, use new tools, etc. [4]. Accordingly, the effectiveness of regional cooperation networks directly depends on the dynamics of relations between the founding states, which perceive international organisations, projects and initiatives created in the region as a more acceptable tool for solving common regional problems in comparison with international organisations.

It is worth noting that much of the research on international processes in the Baltic Sea region has reflected an attempt to find answers to the challenges of rapidly developing globalisation in regional systems: how unique is the emerging model of regional international relations and is it possible to apply the experience of its analysis to the study of other regions? To what extent are the political dynamics in the region a reflection of global political processes? Is it possible to overcome regional political and economic heterogeneity through political design (i. e. by creating diverse cooperation networks and increasing the role of interregional cooperation among states in the region)? (see [5—7] and others).

The approach proposed by Buzan and Wæver, which consisted of the idea that the most important feature of modern regional models of international relations is primarily security problems and the prioritisation of their possible manifestations — the so-called 'Copenhagen School' approach — has become a significant direction of research on the regional model of international relations [8; 9]. This research approach overcomes the romantic fascination with the end of the Cold War,<sup>1</sup> Bringing to the fore the issue of constructing national and regional security models that are in direct interdependence. The political process as a whole (including international relations) is predominantly determined by the formulation of threats by various players ('securitisation' of the political process), by bringing

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, a conversation between the famous Russian researcher D. V. Ofitserov-Belsky and B. Buzan, published in 'International Processes,' seems to be a very interesting piece of material: Buzan, B., 2012, Science of international relations — the domain of a select circle of states, *International Processes*, vol. 10, № 3, p. 73—82.

threats to the level of extraordinary ones, and further — by transferring threats to the political design plane. The spread of this research approach in international studies has led to an expansion of the understanding of security issues, previously considered primarily in the categories of ‘military’ or ‘military-political’ [10].

It should be noted that applying this research approach to the analysis of the reasons for the devaluation of the value of cooperation in regional organisations of the Baltic Sea Region, we pay special attention to the role of Poland and the Baltic States, which ‘securitised’ almost any plane of interaction with the Russian Federation. This aspect, of course, still needs additional research [11; 12]. Poland and the Baltic States, which joined the EU in 2004, in search of their foreign policy role within the EU had a significant influence on securitisation of a number of declared cooperation macro-regional initiatives of the European Union. A telling example is the Eastern Partnership, which has become a tool for constructing an agenda to counter Russia’s interests (see the valuable analysis of the clash in security understanding in regional cooperation between Russia and EU countries by the Irish researcher Christian Kaunert from the School of Law and Government at the University of Dublin [13]).

A significant contribution to the study of the role of cooperation networks in the evolution of the regional model of international relations was made by a group of researchers from the Kaliningrad State University<sup>1</sup>, actively working since the early 1990s, formed around Professor G.M. Fedorov (whose research interests included issues of transboundary cooperation, regional development management, territorial planning, and geopolitics) [2; 14–16].

A specific feature of the research experience of this group was the study of the Baltic Sea region through the prism of political and economic interests of the Russian Federation with a special emphasis on the role of the Kaliningrad region (an exclave region or a semi-exclave region, given its direct access to the sea transport corridor). The concept promoted by the leaders of the research group ‘Kaliningrad region as a region of cooperation between Russia and the EU’ suggested the possibility of using the Kaliningrad region as a point for building cooperation networks to intensify economic, political, scientific, educational and cultural ties with the European Union, which would allow creating a new model of international relations in the Baltic Sea region, solving, among other things, the problem of defining a strategy for socio-economic development of the Kaliningrad region [17]. Studying various aspects of the regional policies of the Russian Federation and the European Union, Professor Fedorov’s research group has become one of the most significant centres of expertise in the field of contemporary international relations in the Baltic Sea Region.

Studies important for understanding the evolution of the regional model of international relations were carried out by scientists from St. Petersburg Univer-

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<sup>1</sup> Kaliningrad State University was renamed Immanuel Kant Russian State University in 2005, and in 2010 the Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University was established on its basis.

sity — Konstantin Khudoley (theoretical and applied aspects of the dynamics of interests of the Russian Federation, the European Union and NATO), Dmitry Lanko (comparative studies of the Baltic States and Northern Europe, political dynamics in the region), Irina Novikova (the study of interregional and inter-municipal cooperation of Russian regions with the countries of Northern Europe) [18–21].

The study of the dynamics of cooperation networks in the Baltic Sea region contributes to the understanding of the current situation in the region and helps to create approaches to the formation of a post-conflict regional agenda — taking into account the accumulated experience of interaction, the remaining international contacts between experts and the academic community, and the understanding of the common interests of the states around the Baltic Sea.

### **Results of the analysis of the experience of building regional cooperation networks**

For this study, let us consider the most relevant cooperation networks in the Baltic Sea region that are characterised by significant political dynamics.

The early 1990s saw a real boom in the creation of cooperation networks in the Baltic Sea Region, some of which broadcast a global agenda to overcome the legacy of bloc confrontation (such as the OSCE and the Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights), while others projected a region-wide agenda, creating a new model of international relations.

The Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) embodied the concept of a ‘region of cohesion’ and has been the most influential in shaping the regional model of international cooperation. In March 1992, at a conference of foreign ministers of countries with direct access to the Baltic Sea and Norway (which is traditionally perceived as a country with dual regional affiliation — both ‘northern’ and ‘Baltic’), an international organization was established at the proposal of Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Uffe Ellemann-Jensen (foreign ministers of Germany and Denmark, respectively), whose goal, by the founding document — the ‘Copenhagen Declaration’ — was proclaimed to be ‘strengthening the cohesion among the countries, leading to greater political and economic stability as well as a regional identity.’

In essence, the CBSS addressed the tasks of designing and building new cooperation networks to overcome the experience of bloc confrontation based on universal principles laid down in the United Nations Charter, the Helsinki Final Act, the Charter of Paris and other CSCE documents.

The Council of the Baltic Sea States has gone through several stages of searching for its programme and organisational identity. The factors determining the inefficiency of the organisation in the first years of its existence were the loose administrative structure of the CBSS and the lack of a clear financial mechanism for project implementation. By 2007, the lack of concrete results of the CBSS activity (it should be reminded that the European Union component in the national

priorities of the Council's member states was being strengthened in parallel) began to devalue the importance of the organisation in the foreign policy strategies of the region's states. It is important to note that the most active role in enhancing the status and operational efficiency of the CBSS was played by Sweden, whose foreign policy prioritised cooperation networks in the region. The possibility of building the country's foreign policy reputation and political development of new territories included in the cooperation networks contributed to direct economic effects — implementation of profitable investment projects, strengthening the role of Swedish financial and industrial groups in the economies of the countries of the region, etc. Sweden's proposals for reforming the CBSS in 2007 transformed the previously amorphous structure into an effective regional development institution with financial instruments and strengthened powers of the secretariat, which increased the authority of the CBSS in the centres of foreign policy planning and decision-making in the countries of the region.

It should be stressed that the CBSS could not fulfil its activities in the conceived non-confrontational and non-aligned format due to the growing political and economic contradictions between the countries of the region, which led to the expansion of NATO's presence in the region and the projection of the interests of 'extra-regional' players into the regional agenda. The 2014 crisis events around Ukraine and the subsequent aggravation of contradictions between Russia and the countries of the 'Collective West' caused the CBSS to drift from an institution for designing and developing a common regional agenda towards a political forum.

On 3 March 2022, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of all the foreign countries of the CBSS and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in a common declaration announced 'the suspension of Russia from the proceedings, work and projects of the CBSS and its working bodies until cooperation under the fundamental principles of international law has become possible again'.<sup>1</sup>

The statement of the Russian Foreign Ministry on the withdrawal of the Russian Federation from the Council of the Baltic Sea States was published on May 17, 2022. It summed up the activities of the CBSS as a key regional platform, which came under the influence of 'extra-regional' players: 'Contradictions in the work of the CBSS have been accumulating for years... NATO and EU states within the Council have abandoned the equal dialogue and principles on which this regional structure in the Baltic was created, and are consistently turning it

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<sup>1</sup> Declaration by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland and Sweden and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the participation of the Russian Federation and Belarus in the work of the Council of the Baltic Sea States, 03.03.2022, *Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, URL: <https://www.gov.pl/web/finlandia/federacja-rosyjska-zawieszona-w-pracach-rady-panstw-morza-baltyckiego> (accessed 28.07.2024).



into an instrument of anti-Russian policy'.<sup>1</sup> It was also decided to withdraw from the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, which was an institution of inter-parliamentary dialogue on the sidelines of the intergovernmental level of cooperation in the CBSS. Thus, the model of cooperation in the Council of the Baltic Sea States changed from a 'cohesion to a 'confrontational' model.

A similar fate (transition from 'cohesion' to 'confrontation' as a result of the implementation of an 'extra-regional' agenda) befell the Northern Dimension, another cooperation network characterised by high intensity and efficiency of practical interaction. 'The Northern Dimension' in its version at the time of the aggravation of the global political crisis in 2022 was positioned as a joint policy of four equal partners: the European Union, the Russian Federation, Norway and Iceland. The implementation of the initiative took place within the framework of the so-called thematic partnerships: environmental; health and social well-being; cultural; and transport.

On 8 March 2022, the European Union, Iceland and Norway suspended all Northern Dimension cooperation with Russia and Belarus 'until further notice'. The activities covered the environment, nuclear safety, healthcare, energy, transport, logistics, trade and investment development, scientific research, education and culture — in short, a model cooperation network of a regional nature was formed, with financial instruments, political support and specific tangible results of work — including on nuclear safety, which includes not only a regional but also a global dimension.

In response to the challenge of bridging the gap in socio-economic development between the 'old' and 'new' members of the European Union, to further the political and economic development of the region in the interests of the European Union, a political plan was developed and operational tools for its implementation were developed in the form of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region (EUSBSR)<sup>2</sup>. It should be noted that the EUSBSR was the first macro-regional strategy of the European Union, which was modelled on the strategies for the Danube (EUSDR, 2010), Adriatic and Ionian (EUSAIR, 2014) and Alpine regions (EUSALP, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry on the withdrawal of the Russian Federation from the Council of the Baltic Sea States 17.05.2022, *Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union and Euratom*, URL: [https://russiaeu.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/zayavlenie\\_mid\\_rossii\\_o\\_vykhode\\_rossiyskoy\\_federatsii\\_iz\\_soveta\\_gosudarstv\\_baltiyskogo\\_morya](https://russiaeu.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/zayavlenie_mid_rossii_o_vykhode_rossiyskoy_federatsii_iz_soveta_gosudarstv_baltiyskogo_morya) (accessed 28.07.2024).

<sup>2</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, 2009, *EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region*, URL: [https://eusbsr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2009\\_commission-communication-on-eusbsr.pdf](https://eusbsr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2009_commission-communication-on-eusbsr.pdf) (accessed 28.07.2024).

The position of Poland, Lithuania,<sup>1</sup> Latvia and Estonia, which joined the European Union in 2004, in developing the EUSBSR was to maximise the influence of the European Commission (and the EU countries as a whole) in the Baltic Sea region, obviously as a counterbalance to Russia, which is gaining economic power and political weight. Promoting the logic of turning the Baltic Sea into an area of preferential interests of the EU (the so-called concept of the European Union inland sea), the developers assumed the ‘umbrella’ nature of the Strategy concerning the national operators of cooperation networks in the region [22], considering the Strategy as a single framework for building interaction with partner countries outside the European Union — Russia, Iceland, Belarus and Norway. Political support for the development of EUSBSR was also provided by the Swedish-Danish ‘Baltic Development Forum’ (‘Baltic Davos’), a key regional project aimed at the political and business elite and social leaders of the Baltic Sea Region.

Estonia, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have realised the logic of integrating national policies in the region with the priorities of the European Union. For example, EUSBSR was supposed to develop a common approach to spatial marine planning for the EU countries within the framework of the Joint HELCOM/VASAB Group, which was established as a tool to harmonise interests for all Baltic Sea Region countries, including Russia (incidentally, the Working Group on Spatial Marine Planning was established at the ministerial meeting in Moscow in 2010, and the Russian presence in the expert and working bodies of the Working Group was significant).

In practice, the Joint HELCOM/VASAB Group provides status and organisational support to the European Union marine spatial planning projects (Plan Bothnia, BaltSeaPlan, PartiSEApate and Baltic SCOPE) [23]. In practice, this means that in this way the implementation of these projects is in line with the logic of promoting the concept of ‘Baltic Sea — European Union Inland Sea’. For example, in the Plan Bothnia project, the HELCOM secretariat was the responsible contractor (recipient of European Union funds) and the VASAB secretariat was the key project partner, while the main content of the project was to develop the principles of co-ordination of joint policies in the field of marine spatial planning between the two EU member States (Sweden and Finland). This state of affairs has been made possible by the availability of funding from the specialised funds of the European Union to organise work on topics that are beneficial and desirable for EUSBSR. HELCOM and VASAB, formerly active creative players in shaping policy objectives for the countries of the region, have become project offices serving the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region.

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<sup>1</sup> On the Baltic Sea Strategy, Resolution of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 19.04.2007, *Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas*, URL: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalActPrint/lt?jfwid=fhhu5ml1c&documentId=TAIS.295996&category=TAD> (accessed 28.07.2024).



The role of EUSBSR is most clearly seen in the relationship with the devaluation of the value of cooperation in the CBSS format for the EU member states [24]. The fact is that one of the organisational and management principles of EUSBSR was the absence of its own funding ‘inside’ the programme, and the projects and initiatives designed as part of EUSBSR were able to attract funding from the budget lines already approved by Brussels in the European Social Fund (ESF), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Cohesion Fund, European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and others. In addition, such programmes as Horizon 2020, BONUS, the LIFE Programme, and the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme also became sources of funding. This decision prioritised the formation of new cooperation projects throughout the region, excluding (or assuming very limited participation of) non-European Union countries — Russia, Iceland, Belarus and Norway.

The adoption of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region as a guiding policy document for the European Union as a whole and for the EU member states was a factor that directly contradicts the logic of the emerging model of the “region of cooperation”: it was the European Union’s cooperation framework and mechanisms, which excluded Russia, that became a priority for the EU member states of the region, although they stipulated special formats for the common regional agenda.

In contrast to the political formats of cooperation developed later, specific practices of cooperation within the framework of the 1973 ‘Convention on Fishing and Conservation of Living Resources in the Baltic Sea and the Belts’ (Gdansk Convention)<sup>1</sup> and the 1974 ‘Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Region’ (Helsinki Convention)<sup>2</sup> have proved to be effective and sustainable. The two regional waves of the European Union enlargement (the priorities of the countries in the Baltic Sea region were synchronised and the degree of influence of EU decisions on national policies increased) made it necessary to clarify the principles of conservation and long-term sustainable exploitation and management of fish stocks in the Baltic Sea region between Russia and the EU. As of 1 January 2007, the Gdansk Convention was no longer applicable, and a new EU-Russia Agreement<sup>3</sup> was developed based on the logic and principles of the 1974 Convention.

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<sup>1</sup> Convention on Fishing and Conservation of Living Resources in the Baltic Sea and the Belts (Gdansk Convention), *Electronic Fund of Legal and Regulatory and Technical Documents*, URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/1901772> (accessed 28.07.2024).

<sup>2</sup> Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Region (Helsinki Convention). Helsinki, HELKOM, URL: [https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/1974\\_Convention.pdf](https://helcom.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/1974_Convention.pdf) (accessed 28.07.2024).

<sup>3</sup> Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the European Community on cooperation in the field of fisheries and conservation of living marine resources in the Baltic Sea of 28.04.2009, *Electronic Fund of Legal and Regulatory and Technical Documents*, URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/902182268> (accessed 28.07.2024).

When explaining the experience of successful cooperation between the countries of the Baltic Sea region on living marine resources, it is an objective fact that the living marine resources of the Baltic Sea region consist of transboundary stocks that migrate between exclusive economic zones. Effective conservation and sustainable exploitation of living marine resources can only be achieved through cooperation in fisheries management and the control and enforcement of fisheries management measures.

The analysis of cooperation networks that had a significant impact on the formation of the model of regional international relations cannot be complete without mentioning the phenomenon of 'Baltic university cooperation' [25], which was expressed in the implementation of the Baltic University Programme (BUP), which became one of the most prominent regional university networks in the world. In turn, at the initiative of the University of Turku, the Baltic Sea Region University Network (BSRUN) was established to discuss issues of academic cooperation between the heads of universities, which, among other things, provided an opportunity for interaction between the relevant state authorities on the scientific and educational agenda. It should be mentioned that educational and research cooperation in the region was also in the field of interest of such public-state projects as 'Triialogue' (which operated from 2010 to 2014 under the auspices of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Germany and Poland), as well as the profile commission of the Russian-German forum 'Petersburg Dialogue'.

In 1991, on the initiative of Uppsala University and with the support of the Swedish government, the educational project 'Baltic University Programme' was launched, based on the use of a then innovative model of distance learning (part of the courses were broadcast online via a satellite TV channel, part of the classes were distributed on videocassettes, and testing and supplementary materials were delivered in printed form from Sweden to the universities participating in the Programme). Thematically, the Programme focused on a common regional agenda: sustainable development issues, and various aspects of environmental protection, as well as the increasingly popular topic of democratic transit and democratic development in the former socialist camp states. In its heyday (2002—2012), the Baltic University Programme included more than 220 universities and other higher education institutions from 12 countries: Belarus, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Sweden, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine (note the purely geographical criterion of regional affiliation used — the location of the partner university in the Baltic Sea catchment area).

At the semantic level, the Programme was in line with the efforts of the Swedish government and business circles to build a new version of the 'Swedish century', which implied political and economic development of the territories of the South-Eastern Baltic to form a zone of its exclusive interests. The priority of the Programme's work on a regional scale was the construction of a cooperation network with an exclusively 'regional' agenda, with ambitions to form a unified scientific and educational space around the 'Swedish core', influencing public

authorities and the dynamics of the regional model of international relations. In December 2009, the Baltic University Programme was approved as a strategic partner of the Council of the Baltic Sea States, which raised dramatically the status of the programme's centre — Uppsala University — and its administration.

The key resources of the Programme were a bank of online courses on various aspects of Baltic Sea Region development, a specialised online library on widely understood 'Baltic Studies' and a network of professors and experts promoting the Programme's topics in their universities [26]. The classical cooperation network with an 'intra-regional' agenda turned out to be unstable due to crisis manifestations in the global political system: after the events of early 2022, the Programme officially joined the Swedish government's position on the so-called Ukrainian issue and curtailed cooperation with universities in Russia and Belarus.

### **Forecasting the post-conflict regional agenda. Conclusions**

A situation of intensive conflict-free interaction emerged between the countries belonging to the recently opposing military and political blocs at the beginning of the last decade of the XX century. There were virtually no territorial disputes, regional organisations and associations were created and worked effectively [27], and regional programmes of economic, cultural and educational cooperation appeared, in which the subjects of the Russian Federation — St. Petersburg, Leningrad and Kaliningrad Regions — actively participated. St. Petersburg information and business centres worked effectively in Finland and Estonia, and the experience of these centres was supposed to be used in designing mutually beneficial cooperation in other countries of the region [20].

The unprecedented scale of implemented trade, economic and infrastructure projects between Russia and the European Union countries, as well as the consistent expansion of opportunities for intra-regional mobility and tourism, allowed researchers to formulate very optimistic forecasts for the development of the Baltic Sea region in the logic of the 'region of cohesion'. The chance to effectively design and implement a unique regional system was not used in the Baltic Sea region, and the model of 'region of cohesion' was replaced by the model of 'cool war' — this is the term by which Konstantin Khudoley described the specifics of the regional model of international relations, formed after the aggravation of contradictions between Russia and the countries of the Collective West [19].

Poland, Germany and the Baltic States saw the European Union as the key moderator of the political and economic agenda in the Baltic Sea region (which was later expressed in the EU Strategy for the Region), and the North Atlantic Alliance (with a parallel strengthening of bilateral military and political cooperation with the United States) as the foundation of their national security and regional security as a whole [28; 29]. The 'Finnish security dilemma' (for more details, see the study by Konstantin Khudoley and Dmitry Lanko [18]) was the aspiration to stay away from possible military conflicts while strengthening one's security through direct intensive cooperation with NATO countries. The bilateral coopera-

tion of Finland and Sweden with NATO countries, in fact, prepared the accession of Sweden and Finland to the alliance [30], which fixed the final dismantling of the concept of 'region of cooperation'. The regional political, diplomatic and military-political processes gaining intensity from that moment on are described exclusively in the categories of conflict: this is how the modern stage of international relations in the Baltic Sea region was established in the form of the 'region of confrontation' model.

Despite the intensive processes of globalisation, a significant increase in the number of regional players, the development of cooperation networks, and the experience of active inter-municipal (interregional) cooperation, interstate relations remained the key to the dynamics of the regional system. It was interstate contradictions, including 'extra-regional' problems projected on the regional agenda (the erosion of the hegemonic model of world politics, the conflict between NATO and the Russian Federation and the acute phase of this conflict — the crisis around Ukraine), as well as the interests of 'extra-regional' players (the United States, France, NATO and the European Union) that became the key factors in the dismantling of the model of the 'region of cooperation' and the formation of the model of the 'region of confrontation'.

An illustrative example of the expansion of military, political and economic interests of 'extra-regional' players in the Baltic Sea region is France, whose main objective 'is to participate in the affairs of the region not so much as a new player ready to offer some original vision and on this basis revive relations with Moscow, but as a disciplined member of NATO, intending to strengthen the common potential' [31 p. 13].

According to the apt observation of Konstantin Khudoley, who describes the uneven dismantling of the Cold War system of international relations in the region in the categories of 'Cool War', characterised by the different intensity of interests in the regions of clash (intersection), in the resulting vacuum of the rules of the game are emerging new practices and rules of behaviour of players in the system of international relations that do not always become generally accepted and generally recognised [19]. This situation, as Konstantin Khudoley notes, increases the probability (but does not make inevitable) the realisation of a confrontation scenario in the Baltic Sea region. However, the same conditions create new opportunities for overcoming conflicts arising from unique situational configurations. The intensity of conflict in the Baltic Sea region is certainly governed by the 'extra-regional' agenda and interests of 'extra-regional' players': it is Russia's post-conflict arrangements with 'extra-regional' players that will be the key factor determining the model of international relations in the Baltic.

Every conflict ends. It already seems necessary to look for a constructive regional agenda for cooperation networks after the conflict. The scientific and expert community and academic centres in Russia and other countries of the Baltic Sea region should be ready now, at a time of high conflict intensity in the

regional model of international relations, to formulate proposals for the political design of overcoming the model of the 'region of confrontation' and to actively participate in the mutual simultaneous desecuritisation of national discourses. The accumulated experience of scientific and academic cooperation through international programmes and direct cooperation between universities, research centres and expert and analytical structures can be in demand even in times of conflict.

In the new post-crisis system of international relations, it is necessary to clearly define the purpose and practical outcome of the 'regional' agenda of the Council of the Baltic Sea Region States, the Northern Dimension, VASAB and HELCOM: the most important challenge will be to overcome the deterioration of cooperation between states while depoliticising and desecuritising (as Buzan and Wæver now understand it) bilateral issues and domestic political agendas in the countries of the region. This means that the construction (restoration, new design) of sustainable cooperation ties will be possible only with obvious effectiveness and mutual benefit of interaction: the general discourse of restoring good neighbourliness and using the experience of cooperation will have to be supported by specific interstate projects, the subject of which will be common issues for the entire Baltic region: the resolution of environmental problems and nature conservation issues in general, harvesting and reproduction of living resources of the Baltic Sea, preservation of common historical and cultural heritage (in the cooperation context), development of scientific and educational cooperation at the sites of regional universities with a special emphasis on the study of the culture and language of immediate neighbours.

It seems that among the cooperation networks, the Northern Dimension has the greatest potential for restoring cooperation during the formation of a post-conflict regional model of international relations due to the presence of a diverse non-political agenda, effective experience of cooperation with Russia, and preserved personal contacts of the participants of the expert groups. The resumption of cooperation within the Council of the Baltic Sea States in the post-conflict era could be based on Russia's 2020 proposals on a set of measures to strengthen it, including a proposal to develop a new strategic document that would define the goals and objectives of Russia's cooperation with the other CBSS countries until 2030.<sup>1</sup>

Taking into account the experience accumulated in all the countries of the region in building cooperation networks that have preserved direct links between participants of political, academic and public projects and initiatives of bilateral and multilateral nature, the presence of common interests of the states in the sphere of ecology and economy, it can be assumed that researchers will be able

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<sup>1</sup> Speech and answers to questions by Russian Foreign Minister S. V. Lavrov during the press conference following the Ministerial Session of the Council of the Baltic Sea States, 21.05.2020, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, URL: [https://www.mid.ru/ru/press\\_service/video/vistupleniya\\_ministra/1433275](https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/video/vistupleniya_ministra/1433275) (accessed 17.10.2024).

to describe the post-conflict model of international relations in the Baltic Sea region not in the categories of confrontation and 'Cool war', but of cooperation and 'Cool peace'.

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