

Building a visible and attractive region: identity, image, branding and transnational cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region

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About the author

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Introduction

Baltic Sea regional cooperation, as we know it today, can be traced back to the early 1990s. The dissolution of the Soviet Union prompted the re-birth and reshaping of several nations around the Baltic Sea and this, coupled with the end of the Cold War dismantling one of the most divisive features in human history, lead to a climate conducive to exchange, collaboration and integration in the Baltic Sea Area. The main driving forces have been the need for economic and political reforms, the high growth in the reforming countries, and the development of new security structures. A strong commitment to regional cooperation at the national, regional and local levels – in both the public and private sectors – has evolved all around the Baltic Sea. Early frontrunners were organisations and collaboration networks like the Baltic Sea Youth Office and the New Hanseatic League, both founded back in 1980, and the Baltic Tourism Cooperation, established in 1985.

The beginning of the 1990s, however, saw a rapid expansion of new kinds of collaboration and, in many instances, a very conscious rejuvenation and evoking of historical links. Cooperation in the fields of economics, politics, environmental protection, security issues, culture, social issues, education, and the development of joint tourism products – like the very successful Baltic Cruise concept – have contributed further to a deepening regional integration. New business opportunities and abundant investment and trade ties have flourished and helped to connect the region; the Baltic Sea is once again a gateway for the free movement of people, goods and services.

But there has been a missing link: despite many more or less successful efforts to (re-)create a region, the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) has remained a diffuse or even an unknown concept. It has been argued that this low visibility comes at a price. At a time when the global competition between countries and regions is heating up, being unknown or having a weak image becomes a serious handicap. The realisation that the Baltic Sea Region needs to become more visible and attractive – both in the region's own countries and to the outside world – emerged in the discourse of regional decision-makers and opinion-leaders around the beginning of this decade. From the very outset, brand-building was declared the preferred

method of going about doing it. The first time it was discussed in an official setting, to the author's knowledge, was at the 2001 Baltic Development Forum Summit, where one session was dedicated to the theme of 'Branding the Baltic Sea Region'.

Since then it has been claimed that the Baltic Sea Region is too much of a 'well-hidden secret' to the outside world, that it deserves being known for all its qualities, and that it could and should be seen as a 'global frontrunner', the 'Top of Europe', and a 'magnet for capital, talent, tourism and innovative thinking'. There is no doubt that the region has been aiming high.

At the same time, it is unfair to say that the region is entirely unknown to the outside world. *TIME Magazine* covered it in 2007 under the heading, 'The Baltic Sea's Renaissance', and wrote about the 'Sea of Plenty' and an 'economic powerhouse of the 21st century'¹.

BusinessWeek chose a different angle when it covered it in 2008 under the heading, 'The Challenge of Branding the Baltics', to some extent questioning the viability of the idea of building a brand for the BSR².

Perhaps rightly so, because admittedly there are challenges that need to be addressed.

So the question to pose here is: Is it possible to create a regional brand with a clear, attractive and unique identity and image? A brand which, at the same time, is acceptable to all participating nations and which is recognizable and attractive to all relevant external audiences? If so, how can it be done? I will try to present one take on this.

But first of all – what is actually a brand? In short, one way of seeing a brand is as a conceptual entity that creates positive, unique and distinguishable associations. And brand-building involves creating and maintaining these associations. It is all about identifying, developing and communicating the parts of the product, corporate or place identity that are favourable in the eyes of specific target groups. According to established practice, this needs to be done with coherence and consistency. And the idea or message you want to project needs to be credible, authentic and easily understood by both the internal and the external audience.

Place-branding borrows methods and techniques of marketing from the business world, but, if applied at all sensibly, it is much more than a marketing tool. It can better be described as both an organizational principle and a strategic world-view, a lens through which you see the world around you and gauge the implications of the events that happen in it.

According to research and established practice, the practice of place-branding can offer the means to achieve not only economic but to some extent also social and cultural benefits. It can promote the attractiveness of a place for investors, export buyers, tourists, residents, employees and students. It can also be a place-development tool, in the sense that it can serve to focus questions of identity and vision, and provide driving force and direction in the development efforts of a place. Furthermore, it is said to have a potential to mobilise civic pride; that is to make the inhabitants of a place more aware and proud of its uniqueness and achievements.

Any well-planned branding exercise should start with a rigorous assessment of the place and by asking very fundamental questions: How is our place perceived? What are our strengths and weaknesses? Do we have something that is considered unique?

On this basis, the next step is to formulate a vision for the future. What and where do we want to be? Where should we go from here? How should this be done? A part of the vision is to identify and formulate a set of core values and core ideas that should permeate communication and behaviour towards target groups. These values and ideas should not be a desk product; they have to be anchored in the identity of the place. At the same time, a brand identity can to some degree be ‘aspirational’, i.e. not so much expressing what you are today as what you want and aim to be in the future. The challenge lies in striking an appropriate balance between current on-the-ground realities and a visionary interpretation of future potential.

However, without going into details, branding is a very difficult and complex endeavour for a number reasons for any place – be it a town, city, country or, not least, a ‘macro-region’ encompassing several countries.

I want to argue here that it might sometimes be enabling and instructive to think of branding as an approach. Something in the style of a ‘brand-aware approach’ that can be applied to statecraft, to foreign policy and traditional diplomacy, to trade policy, to investment, export and tourism promotion, to public and cultural diplomacy, to educational exchange and – in the case of the Baltic Sea Region – to transnational cooperation.

One can safely assume that the difficulties of place-branding are a function of the size and diversity of the place; the larger and more diverse a place, the fewer the opportunities to apply ‘conventional’ branding. So when dealing with the BSR, the brand-aware approach, rather than a fully-fledged place-branding strategy, might be sensible.

The current state of the image

Against the above background, one needs to ask: Does the BSR already have a distinguishable brand image? To put it briefly, there is little evidence to support this. The few surveys that have been carried out point in the same direction: there is no clear brand image, either internally or externally.

One study, conducted by Observer for Baltic Development Forum in 2003, was about the media’s perception of the region. It showed that the media have little interest in the BSR as an entity and that publicity was limited. The region hardly appeared as an economic entity and it was mainly taken into account in the political context³.

A second study, carried out by the BalticStudyNet in 2006, a network whose aim is to promote the BSR as an area for higher education, took an outsider’s perspective. This study reached the conclusion that the BSR has not – for the world at large – become a visible and separate identity, either in politics or as a market place, let alone as a higher education area⁴.

Another study, published by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) in 2006, measured the Swedish public’s view of BSR integration. This study concluded that the region generally is not seen as a separate entity by the Swedish public, and

that the name does not evoke all that many positive associations. Most people do not even seem to have a clear idea of which countries make up the region⁵.

A Polish opinion poll, commissioned by the Office of the Committee for European Integration (UKIE) and to some extent inspired by the approach in the aforementioned Swedish study, also showed that it is by no means clear in the public perception which countries make up the region. For example, only 46.9% consider Lithuania as part of the region, whereas Norway is seen as a BSR country by 53.2%. Surprisingly, 12 % of respondents see Great Britain as a country in the region⁶.

See a further discussion on delimitations of the region below.

To conclude this section, it is not difficult to imagine the challenges entailed in building an image for a place that is not really seen as a coherent entity either by outsiders or by its own population.

Management and coordination

It is possible from the terrain of place-branding practice and research to identify two major challenges that the region presumably would have to deal with if it wants to apply a brand-aware approach. These are, first, the diversity of the region, both in terms of the multiple national identities and many potential stakeholders, has to be taken into account. The second challenge concerns how to deal with the management and coordination of a brand-aware strategy in the absence of a central decision-making authority.

One of the most critical challenges for a place aiming at promoting a stronger image is to coordinate the messages communicated and streamline efforts, not only across government departments and levels, but also with non-governmental organisations and private companies and their industry associations. And these all have different goals and create their own brands. A joint branding effort, however, needs to be managed in a strategically sound way; priorities need to be set, core ideas identified and agreed upon, funding attracted, research carried out, and, most importantly, communication and behaviour need to be somewhat coordinated and aligned. All places communicate in manifold ways at virtually all times. If the main messages that emanate from a place are not to some degree coordinated, there is a risk that the place will be presenting diverging and even contradictory messages, which in the end may prove to be detrimental to the place's image.

So, without some degree of coordination and alignment of communication and behaviour amongst central stakeholders of the BSR, it will be very difficult for the region to improve its visibility and attractiveness.

In this regard, the BSR faces a basic coordination and management problem owing to the fact that there is no central, decision-making authority in the region. No single organization in the region has the political mandate or the financial resources to devise and implement a common brand strategy. In one sense, the BSR is like a small EU, but with neither the EU's institutional setup, political mandate, nor financial muscle. As a result, BSR stakeholders would have to compensate by employing more of a collaborative network approach and work in coordinated partnerships and alliances.

Nation-branding expert Simon Anholt has suggested a ‘soft-power approach’ to governing a branding effort in the Baltic Sea Region:

‘It is clear that no person or body exists with the influence (or the right) to impose a common brand strategy onto the institutions, governments, private sector bodies and general populations of the region’s member nations. Arguably, it wouldn’t be a good idea even if it were possible. Yet without some degree of harmonised behaviour and communication amongst these stakeholders, the region will never develop a powerful or recognisable brand identity. We should rely on people’s natural desire to join in when they see a truly inspiring (and demonstrably effective) initiative, and when they clearly understand why it is in their interest to do so⁷.

The soft-power approach will necessitate harmonised behaviour and communication, which arguably will be facilitated by a feeling of affinity and unity of purpose amongst stakeholders.

Unity of purpose beyond geography

Against the above, the lack of management and coordination could to some degree be compensated for by a strong unity of purpose among the place’s stakeholders. I have argued elsewhere that this will necessitate that the stakeholders in the Region have clear and comprehensive common interests and/or to some extent share a sense of a common identity⁸.

Place-branding theory supports the idea that there is a strong link between a place’s identity and the brand identity you can develop and communicate. A common identity will, as suggested above, facilitate unity of purpose amongst the stakeholders of a place, making it easier for them to work together; for example, to agree on core values and to get them to pull in the same direction when implementing brand-building.

But there is no doubt that the BSR is a diverse region. Branding expert and historian Wally Olins⁹ has argued that the BSR lacks many of the prerequisites for building a brand: not only is there a lack of political structure, but also there is not really any common culture, common history, or even linguistic affinity.

Is this really the case, and if so, are there other common denominators that could compensate?

I have, by drawing on research on the region conducted in various academic disciplines, tried to identify signs of a coherent region and common Baltic Sea Region identity. But I also looked at various indicators for regional integration and common interests, such as foreign direct investment and trade patterns, passenger flows and transnational cooperation.

An attempt to lay out the most important findings will be made below.

First of all, what defines a coherent region and is the BSR such a region? Larsen, by drawing on the analysis done by Hettne et al.¹⁰ of the ‘New Regionalism’, has stated that:

‘The most basic notion of the concept “region” is a geographical unit delimited by more or less natural physical barriers and marked by ecological characteristics. For this kind of region to develop into a higher level of maturity, a substantial amount of economic interactions and cultural exchange, political

stability, a high level of security and some degree of institutionalisation, are needed. A mature region is an acting subject with a distinct identity, actor capability, legitimacy, and structure of decision-making; a region that is able to solve its own conflicts whatever they might be'¹¹.

To start with the most basic notion of a region, geography, it is often argued that the Baltic Sea, as a connecting and uniting space, is the most important common denominator binding the region together. However, from a place-branding perspective, the fact that the region shares a common geography, as Baltic Sea rim states, is not sufficient.

Add to this the fact that the region is not even clearly delimited in geographical terms, making the 'geography' denominator even more inept. One could argue, if one wants to be really negative, that the region does not even meet the most basic criterion of natural physical barriers. There is no question that the 9 Baltic Sea littoral states are part of the region in more strict geographic terms. Ecologically speaking though, countries like Belarus, Ukraine and Norway are seen as part of the region as they are part of its drainage basin.

If one adds political and cultural dimensions, an even more complex picture emerges. In many contexts, Norway and Iceland are considered part of the region because of the cultural and political connections with the rest of the Scandinavian area. This is the case in the political cooperation of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). The organisation for cooperation between sub-national regions, BSSSC, includes regions in the 9 littoral states and Norway (which, however, is called a littoral state). The EU definition, naturally, excludes Norway, Iceland and Russia, and only the most northern Bundesländer in Germany are included. In many cases, only the most northern parts of Poland are included. These definitions encompass neither Berlin nor Warsaw, which both are active members of the Baltic Metropolises Network (BaltMet).

As for the region's name, there is no real consistency either. The name Baltic Sea is used in English, in Latvian (Baltijas jūra), Lithuanian (Baltijos jūra), Polish (Morze Bałtyckie or Bałtyk) and Russian (Baltiyskoye Morye (Балтийское море)). In Germany, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, people call the Baltic Sea by its historical name: the Eastern Sea (Ostsee, Östersjön, Østersjøen, Østersøen). Peter the Great in Russia called it, from his perspective, the Western Sea. In the same vein, the West Sea (Läänemeri) is the current name in Estonian. Finnish, on the other hand, uses the 'Germanic' name of 'East Sea' (Itämeri), disregarding the geography.

And then there is the region's size, on which there is no commonly accepted definition. Depending on the definition employed, the region's population ranges from about 50 million to 100 million inhabitants, which is not an insignificant divergence.

Add to this that, as noted above, public opinion is far from having any clear ideas of which countries make up the region.

Gerner, from the disciplinary terrain of historical research, confirms the need to look beyond geography when trying to find common denominators for the region:

'It is obvious that geographical traits are not a sufficient condition for the creation of political, economic and cultural co-operation envisaged by the idea of a Baltic region. In addition, a common history, similarity of political culture,

economic interdependence, linguistic affinity, and even personal relations between political leaders, social groups and individuals may be considered to be main factors in discussions with a bearing on the creation of a regional identity among the partners in question.’¹²

Consequently, one has to ask; is there such a thing as a BSR identity that could serve to unify the purpose of the various actors?

Do any of the factors mentioned by Gerner indicate a regional identity or, at least, an emerging identity? Or has there historically been a Baltic Sea identity that could facilitate the creation of a new identity and thus facilitate brand building?

Answering these questions would require looking at research done on the region and its identity from other perspectives. A comprehensive analysis of whether a common identity and an integrated region exist goes beyond the scope of this study, but for the purposes of this paper, a brief outline of this issue is deemed necessary. The aim of this section is to illustrate how the region could (or could not) be seen as having a common identity by looking at research on cooperation, integration and other forms of interaction.

From the vantage point of economic geography research, Törnqvist claimed in 1996 that:

‘The regions around the Baltic Sea have common roots in history; a feature that we later on will claim is a very important precondition for understanding and feeling of affinity [...]. There is much that speaks in favour of that and even networks that have been largely unutilised for 40 years are capable of promoting a sense of kinship and facilitating new network constructions (author’s own translation)’¹³.

Nonetheless, later economic geographic research suggests that it is hard to claim that the BSR is a coherent region, at least in the traditional sense. Nilsson¹⁴ examined cross-border interactions in the region by looking at aviation and passenger flow patterns. He found that the process of integration that is taking place in the area cannot be seen as one coherent process. Cornett¹⁵ analysed integration in the BSR by looking at trade and FDI patterns. His conclusion was that there were clear signs of an economic integration taking place, especially in the 1990s. But figures from the beginning of this century indicate a slower pace in the process compared to the 1990s and one cannot yet speak of an integrated region from this perspective.

Culturally, there are common traits, but they are subtle ones. Larsson claims that:

‘This depiction has with clarity shown that the architecture and the visual arts in the countries around the Baltic Sea down through the centuries show so many consistencies, connections and relations that without doubt one can speak of the art landscape of the Baltic Sea area. However, one cannot overlook that this art landscape has not only been characterised by unity but to almost as a high degree by chronologically and regionally determined differences and contrasts. The art landscape of the Baltic Sea area has thus never had any homogenous unity separate from the rest of the world. It is rather that the main worldwide network of relations is condensed so strongly around the Baltic Sea that one after all can speak about a coherent region’¹⁶ (author’s own translation)

Historically, connecting elements are visible. Trading ships have connected the countries in the region for more than 1,000 years. For example, the Hanseatic League, the world's first free trade alliance, which dominated east-west commerce in Europe for 400 years, connected cities such as Hamburg, Riga, Tallinn, Gdansk, Visby, Bergen and Kaliningrad in a strong and prosperous alliance. Trading agreements were also made with inland cities in the BSR countries, connected by the rivers, such as Koknese in Latvia, Polotsk and Vitebsk in Belarus and Smolensk and Novgorod in Russia.

Observers have pointed out that since even before the fall of the iron curtain, and even more so in the 1990s, political actors put forth ideas of the creation of a Baltic Sea region by evoking common historical traits¹⁷. One example is how Björn Engholm, then head of government of the German Land Schleswig-Holstein, put forward the notion of the new Hanseatic League as a uniting historical factor already in the 1980's, before the fall of the iron curtain.

Interestingly, this notion is also extensively referred to by decision-makers in the region when stating what might be termed the 'historical *raison d'être*' for increased regional cooperation. An illustration of this can be found in the compilation of essays written by prominent decision-makers in the region and published by the Baltic Sea Chambers of Commerce Association (BCCA). Five out of 16 contributions explicitly mention the Hanseatic League when giving a rationale for, background to, or uniting element for regional cooperation. At least two contributions mention it in more implicit terms¹⁸. In a study conducted by the author, the notion was also referred to by six out of nine interviewees when asked about their spontaneous perceptions of the region in general and what traits or attributes could be used to describe the region¹⁹.

But, as expressed by Gerner, 'the obvious question to pose here is whether political actors can construct a new region and legitimise it by way of retroactively creating a history, which gives a sense of collective identity to the people inhabiting the region?'²⁰

The overall conclusion of this section would be that the region does have common historical roots and to some extent can show a common historical identity. The last 15 years have also seen a considerable growth in integration and interaction. But from the standpoint of various definitions of a region, this has not happened at a pace that would allow us to speak of a coherent region. In short, there are indications that a region is under formation, but it might still be too soon to speak of a shared regional identity. One valid conclusion, therefore, would be that there is a risk that the unity of purpose of key stakeholders in the region is not strong enough to facilitate a coordinated and well-managed brand-building effort.

One thing is sure though; even though there is no clear-cut evidence of a shared regional identity foundation on which brand-building effort could be based, there are common and legitimate interests that motivate closer interaction. Let us take a closer look at some of them.

Common interests and high legitimacy

On the positive side of the account, we can add that this region is sometimes said to be one of the most cooperation intensive in the world, which is a clear indicator of common interests and a feeling of affinity. It is clear that the abundance of networks can be a measure of regional integration, where the number of networks is a positive indicator of regional

integration. As an illustration, already in 1996 there were 190 initiatives, agreements, networks and organizations promoting cooperation in the region²¹. It is highly likely that no one can keep track of how many there are today.

An unscientific Google-test can support the claim that the region indeed is cooperation intensive.

The number represents the number of Google-hits each region received (different combinations were used, such as the ‘Mediterranean Region’, ‘Mediterranean Sea Region’, ‘Mediterranean countries’ and so on).

The results show that the Mediterranean and the Nordic regions are far more known than the BSR:

Region

1. Mediterranean Region, 2 490 200 hits
2. Nordic Region, 2 408 000
3. Baltic Sea Region, 433 100
4. Benelux Region, 364 280
5. Visegrad Region, 139 170

However, if we add ‘cooperation’ to the search (like ‘cooperation in the Mediterranean Region’, ‘Mediterranean cooperation’ and so on) a quite different picture emerges. Suddenly the BSR get more hits than all the other regions:

Cooperation + Region

1. Baltic Sea Region, 87 900 hits
2. Nordic Region, 59 893
3. Mediterranean Region, 41 965
4. Visegrad Region, 1006
5. Benelux Region, 452²²

This should be taken with a grain of salt, but it should at least give an indication of the high interest in regional cooperation.

Interestingly enough, the BSR is more known than Benelux and Visegrad, two more or less politically ‘created’ regions with some shared identity elements. According to Williams²³, the BSR is to a large extent not politically created in a traditional way. An interesting – and to some extent unique – feature of BSR cooperation is that it first emerged as a bottom-up and grassroots movement from ‘below’, rather than originating from political pressure from ‘above’. Among the driving forces was a vague idea of a shared cultural heritage and identity and of perceived common interests deriving from the lowest common denominator of a geographic and economic entity. Translated into branding language, this means that to some extent the BSR has emerged as a place-brand entity ‘organically’ rather than in a top-down, systematic and planned manner. Needless to say, this is a strength in terms of legitimacy, credibility and authenticity for a brand-building effort, both in relation to internal stakeholders of the region and to external target groups.

In this regard, a positive indicator comes from the above-mentioned Swedish study. Even though little was known about the region, the regional integration efforts enjoyed a high level of legitimacy in the eyes of the public, even higher than EU cooperation²⁴.

This is interesting indeed, especially in light of the fact that the EU has immensely much more financial and institutional resources at its disposal, both to make policy and to communicate its work. Indeed, it may not be too far-fetched to assert that the key to the legitimacy of the BSR cooperation stems from the bottom-up and grass-roots approach, which by its very nature should be both more inclusive and more driven by common interests.

There is some more good news. Poland has often been described as uninterested in Baltic Sea Region affairs and has had much of its political and economic focus in virtually all other directions but north, perhaps particularly to the south and west. Nevertheless, the Polish opinion poll cited above revealed that one in four Poles feel a sense of identification and affiliation with the Baltic Sea Region. This can be compared with the fact that only 18% share these kinds of sentiments towards the Visegrad Group (to which Hungary, and two of Poland's immediate neighbours, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, belong). To this can be added that as much as 52% of respondents in the three Baltic Sea coastal provinces expressed a close relationship with the BSR²⁵.

So, in terms of unity of purpose, the presence of common interests and high legitimacy is clearly something that the Region has going for it.

A virtual region?

A few years ago, nation-branding expert Simon Anholt suggested the Baltic Sea Region will only exist as a brand. Since it does not have any formal statutory or political identity and does not meet the standard criteria for a coherent region, it could only be seen as a 'virtual' region, an idea²⁶.

Is this a viable idea? It is intriguing indeed, but the question is whether it is possible to build a virtual place brand; this would basically mean a place brand without a place. It might simply be a contradiction in terms.

One thing is sure though – the region is quite difficult to define as a conventional geographical place due to its complex, amorphous and changing nature. Moreover, thinking of the region in this virtual way could resolve some of the conceptual road blocks discussed above.

Since the region is difficult to define not only geographically but also politically and culturally, it might be enabling to think of it as a kind of conceptual entity (in line with the definition of a brand used above) or, if you like, a symbolic space, a post-modern construct with a number of common, unifying features, rather than a conventional place.

One advantage of this perspective is that it could serve as being welcoming; everyone who feels compelled by and wants to join the notion of the BSR is welcome to do so – be it Belarus (a country that the Prime Minister of Lithuania thinks should be invited to join CBSS²⁷) or the Dutch (!) collaboration network Noord-Nederland, which has taken an interest in BSR cooperation through its participation in the Northeast-European Corridor project, ranging from northern Netherlands to Sankt Petersburg and as a member of BDF.

And besides, there are other places that exist more as a brand than as a defined place. Think about the notion of the Mediterranean, for example. The Mediterranean region is not clearly defined either geographically or culturally (for example, does the region include only the 'Latin' southern European states (including Portugal, which has no Mediterranean Coast), or all southern European states including the Balkans and Greece, or does it simply include all littoral states?). And it has no formal statutory or political identity, even less so than the BSR, one can argue. Yet there are concepts such as 'Mediterranean cuisine' (682 000 Google hits), 'Mediterranean architecture' (96 500 hits), 'Mediterranean culture' (52 800 hits) and 'Mediterranean lifestyle' (30 400 hits), all existing firmly in the collective awareness. (As a comparison, 'Baltic Sea cuisine' receives 3 Google hits).

Moreover, the region is so complex and diverse that it seems theoretically difficult to apply the 'conventional' approaches of place-branding to it. The region is in many senses experimental and new, something to which conventional rules might not apply.

It is sometimes asserted that globalisation and the creation of supra-national entities such as the European Union represent a 'post-national order where the classic parameters of the nation are rethought, unbounded by geography and national politics in the face of globalisation'²⁸, which is altering the concept of identities, especially national ones, and that nationhood slowly is being replaced by a higher notion of citizenship.

At the BDF Summit 2006, Simon Anholt was asked to suggest three overall 'brand stories', around which to structure a BSR branding effort. One of these stories revolved around the idea that the BSR is a region 'born in the age of globalisation' and the 'only economically significant place on earth that was born for, and, into a global world'²⁹.

The fact that the EU (in essence a post-national construct, to some extent designed to tame the forces of globalisation) for the first time ever is launching a new type of policy framework, a so-called 'institutional innovation', with the BSR as a pilot case might be illustrative for this line of reasoning (see more about the EU strategy below).

So, maybe it is not too inappropriate after all to consider the region a true post-national, post-modern construct that really represents something new and unique – a virtual, symbolic region characterised by a bottom-up, inclusive collaboration – and to which conventional policies, strategies and theories do not immediately apply.

However, a word of caution: the brand-aware approach stipulates that it is critical to be audience-aware and maintain an outside-in perspective when trying to assess a place's strengths, unique features and attractiveness vis-à-vis target groups. A common pitfall in place-branding is excessive introspection, i.e. that the assessment becomes a 'navel gazing' exercise. The BSR may have many unique and special attributes, but one must not forget to ask its external target audiences about their opinions and perceptions of the region.

And the future?

In this section, a few recommendations will be made, with a slight bias towards pure communication efforts. It is important to bear in mind, however, that this is only one part of the 'brand-aware approach'. If the Baltic Sea Region wants to be more visible and seen as a more coherent and attractive entity, it needs both to continue working with its integration,

identity-building and economic development efforts, and to keep on communicating its achievements and attractions.

First of all, even though the bottom-up character of the regional cooperation could be seen as a strength, more coordination and harmonization is needed. Recall from above that the region has a management and coordination problem. The results of the EU strategy for the BSR might help to alleviate that problem.

1. The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region – a unique window of opportunity

In 2007 the European Council decided to ask the European Commission to work out an EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. The Strategy will be presented to the European Council in June 2009 and be one of the main priorities of the Swedish EU Presidency during the second half of 2009. The Commission services, with Directorate General Regional Policy leading the work, presented the first draft of the Strategy at the end of the 2008 consultation process with stakeholders.

This is the first time ever that the EU has launched an institutional framework for a deepened ‘macro-regional’ cooperation.

The aim of the Strategy will be to coordinate the efforts of various actors in the region (member states, regions, financing institutions, the EU, pan-Baltic organisations, non-governmental bodies, etc.) so that by working together they can promote a more balanced development of the Region.

One out of four main objectives is ‘to make the Baltic Sea Region a more accessible and attractive place for both its inhabitants, for competent labour force and for tourists’³⁰. This aim has been interpreted by observers as being about regional brand-building and the promotion of a clearer identity for the BSR³¹.

Moreover, the European Union's Baltic Sea Region Programme 2007-2013 for transnational cooperation has as its main objective to ‘make the Baltic Sea region an attractive place to invest, work and live in’ and singles out regional branding as one important pillar in its programme document³².

Needless to say, these two frameworks present a unique opportunity to increase the region’s attractiveness and visibility. Regional stakeholders should take the opportunity to coordinate their activities and objectives under the umbrella of the Strategy and make full use of the financing and cooperation instruments provided by the frameworks.

Complementing the drive and enthusiasm of the bottom-up cooperation characteristic for the BSR with the structured, top-down policy framework of the EU might turn into a very powerful brew for regional collaboration. The framework is there, the time is ripe to turn this potential into real benefits for the region.

2. A media-aware approach

An important cornerstone of a brand-aware approach to region building should be a media-aware approach to transnational cooperation. Identity formation processes are largely shaped through and by the media: they play a key role in the formulation and circulating of ideas and

in cultivating a community's self-image and provide the symbolic space for identity formation³³.

Unfortunately, the BSR perspective is not common in media reporting. To take a very practical example: the internet telephone company Skype was founded by a Dane and a Swede and Estonian programmers wrote the computer code. A true Baltic Sea Region success venture in other words. The national media, however, did not see it this way: the Swedish national newspapers heralded it as a Swedish innovation; the Danish national media hailed it as the fruits of the Dane's efforts; and, the Estonian media stressed the venture's Estonian credentials.

It is very difficult to influence the media to look beyond the purely national interest. But it should not be impossible. At the moment there is no organisation, such as a press office, news agency or major media actor, with a regional perspective on news. So there should be big scope for promoting a Baltic Sea Region perspective. One idea would be to set up a Baltic Sea Region press office that inspires the media to cover the Region.

Even the media itself has realised this need. An example is an editorial covering the BSR strategy of the EU featuring in Dagens Nyheter, Sweden's largest daily, going as far as to claim that the work to implement an EU strategy for the BSR might fail completely if more efforts are not put in to creating a joint communication platform in the form of a secretariat and a website³⁴.

3. Influence the influencers and seizing opportunities

The region needs to focus more on public relations and influencing opinion leaders. Essentially, it does not have the financial or institutional resources to launch more conventional promotion programmes. Add to that that some of the more conventional marketing techniques, such as advertising, are not only expensive but also quite inefficient when it comes to place-branding. When you cannot out-spend competitors, you have to out-smart them.

To this end, an open attitude towards seizing opportunities might be helpful. Decisions and policies are not made and ideas do not come up in an entirely systematic fashion (as we sometimes would like to think); rather, they arise randomly and unsystematically.

Here are two examples of opinion forming through timely 'opportunity-seizing' in the BSR context.

The first example concerns how the term 'Top of Europe' was coined. The Baltic Development Forum organised a members and partners meeting during the spring of 2006. Carl Bildt, the present Swedish foreign minister, was one of the speakers. After his presentation, people in the audience started asking him questions about branding the region, a topic in which he did not seem too interested in talking about. But everyone else at the meeting kept talking about branding. After a while he said something in the vein of 'Well, if you really insist on talking about this branding thing, then I think you should call the region the "top of Europe"'. Everyone at the meeting seemed thrilled at the idea and it was adopted straight into the coming branding-process discussions. And half a year later, at the BDF summit in Helsinki, after he had become foreign minister, he seemed rather proud that he coined the phrase, and seemed much more willing to talk about branding (see e.g. the summit

interview at http://www.bdforum.org/show/english/summit/006_summit/video_features/carl_bildt.aspx).

The influencer seems to have been influenced.

Since becoming foreign minister, Carl Bildt has repeatedly used the term himself in media and official speeches³⁵, and the use of the term has been quite widespread in a range of BSR settings³⁶.

Place-branding experts have claimed that the term is too generic and that it might have been premature to begin using a catchphrase before the necessary research and identification of potential messages and core ideas had been undertaken. ‘You should not put a label on the bottle before you know its content’, was one comment³⁷. The fact that it has been used before (it is the name of the Nordic Council of Ministers’ newsletter and it is also an established slogan for the Swiss holiday resort Jungfrauoch) can also make it somewhat unsuitable.

Nevertheless, it represents an instructive example of how place promotion entails seizing opportunities and working with opinion formation. And the fact that the term has been so widely accepted and used makes it useful.

Another interesting example is the ‘Polish plumber campaign’. Before the French referendum on the European Constitution in May 2005, intense debates started about the new Central and Eastern European member states.

The French anti-constitution campaigners created the ‘Polish plumber’, who emerged in the debate as the mysterious worker from a newly joined country and who became a scapegoat threatening the jobs of the French workers.

Some weeks later, a symbolic and mythical person with the same name was created by the Polish Tourist Agency in Paris. A handsome young model in a plumber’s uniform invited the French to visit Poland, where they would meet many more like him. This image was intended as a joke, but it was soon picked up by the French, Polish and the international media, and proved to be a creative and powerful idea.

This campaign was seen as a victory of Polish creativity, and it was many times more effective and significantly less expensive than any country advertising campaign³⁸.

Moreover, if one wants to influence the influencers, presence where decisions and opinions are shaped is needed. In Europe, there is no doubt where the relevant hot spot is: Brussels. It is bordering on being a hygiene factor for anyone who wants to have a say in European opinion forming and public affairs to be present in Brussels. So BSR stakeholders simply need to set up a joint Brussels office.

4. Branding dialogue

The fact that many of the countries in the region (particularly Estonia, Poland and Sweden) were among the pioneers in nation-branding, and that basically every country in the region today works with nation-branding, is an advantage in the sense that they have the ‘mental maturity’ for branding. At the same time, there is an opportunity for increased cooperation between the different nation brands of the BSR. It is sometimes claimed that the BSR brand-

building effort competes with the national brands. This should not be the case: a strong BSR brand can never replace a nation brand; it will only add a complementary layer and provide added value when it makes sense to benefit from being part of a larger region. The BSR will most probably never be a completely comprehensive brand, but rather a kind of a 'pick-and-choose' brand, complementing other brands. As an example, when trying to attract the regional head office of a global corporation, it might make more sense to communicate that your country or city is part of a region and a market with nearly 100 million inhabitants, but when trying to attract talented employees to that same head office, it might make more sense to market your city as a good location in which to live.

In any case, as touched on above, increased collaboration, information exchange and alignment of activities are needed. An enhanced dialogue between the transnational and national but also sub-national branding efforts is therefore essential. The possibly worn out concept of 'cooperative competition' needs to be promoted here. Cooperation in attracting for example tourists or investors to the Baltic Sea Region should be the guiding principle. Once a 'place buyer' has decided for the Region, the competition between the different nations, regions, cities and localities can start.

The BaltMet Promo project starting in October 2009 will have as one of its tasks facilitation of policy dialogue and alignment of objectives and activities between different branding initiatives and actors in the field of place-branding in the BSR.

5. Ambassador networks

Can we create networks of people inside and outside the region who feel an emotional attachment to it and who are willing to 'spread the word'? To create a network of BSR ambassadors – a kind of 'friends of the Baltic Sea Region' network if you like – could offer many opportunities. There are many people both within and outside the Region who are supporters of a visible and attractive BSR. Research has suggested that ambassador networks offer many benefits to a place: they can, for example, promote the place through the 'word-of-mouth' effect (considered one of the most effective and cost-effective communication tools there is), provide a tool for place development and promote civic pride³⁹. In that sense, an ambassador network could help promote the region through communication and development of its attractiveness and its cohesion.

The BaltMet Promo project will set up a 'Baltic Sea Region Ambassador Network' during its project period, which hopefully can become permanent after the project ends.

6. Our common sea

Last but not least, we need to have an engaging and credible vision for the most precious and endangered element of the Region: the Baltic Sea. And we need to deliver on that vision.

It is claimed above that as a uniting factor the Baltic Sea is insufficient as a common denominator binding the Region together, at least from a place-branding perspective. However, the fact that it is now been established beyond doubt that the Baltic Sea is one of the most polluted seas in the world should serve as a unifying factor. It is a pressing issue that only can be solved by joint efforts.

Symbolically, this issue has immense implications. Any claims that the BSR is an attractive and coherent region with strong collaboration networks will be hollow and lack credibility and authenticity, if we in the Region cannot show that we jointly want and can make the Baltic Sea a clean and alive sea again.

¹ Purvis, 2007

² Collier, 2008

³ Observer, 2003

⁴ Schymik, 2007

⁵ Dahlander, 2006

⁶ Pilecka, 2008

⁷ 2005 (I)

⁸ see Andersson, 2007

⁹ 2005

¹⁰ 1999

¹¹ Larsen in BSSSC, 2000, p. 1

¹² Gerner, 2001, p. 24

¹³ Törnqvist, 1996, p. 95

¹⁴ 2003

¹⁵ 2003

¹⁶ in Kreslins et al., 2003, p. 282-283

¹⁷ Gerner, 2001

¹⁸ BCCA, 2002

¹⁹ Andersson, 2005

²⁰ 2001, p. 22

²¹ Stålvant, 1996

²² The search was done 23 May 2008

²³ 2001

²⁴ Dahlander, 2006

²⁵ Pilecka, 2008

²⁶ Anholt, 2005 (II)

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- ²⁷ Collier, 2008
- ²⁸ Skinner and Kubacki, 2007, p. 308
- ²⁹ Anholt, 2006
- ³⁰ European Commission, Regional Policy, Territorial Cooperation
- ³¹ Ryba, 2008, p. 26 and Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009, p. 64
- ³² BSR Programme 2007-2013, final document
- ³³ Riegert, 2004
- ³⁴ Jewert, 2008
- ³⁵ See e.g. www.regeringen.se/sb/d/7417/a/84037 (in English) or www.moderat.se/web/Ostersjoregionen_kan_bli_modell_for_Europa.aspx (in Swedish ('Östersjöregionen är på topp i Europa'))
- ³⁶ E.g. by pan-Baltic organisations such as BDF (http://www.bdforum.org/show/english/news/_009_summit_prospectus.aspx), Scanbalt (e.g. www.scanbalt.org/sw15725.asp) and CPMR-BSC (www.balticseacommission.org/) and in the media (<http://www.dn.se/opinion/kolumner/unionen-slapper-loss-1.496291>)
- ³⁷ See in Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009, p. 63
- ³⁸ Szondi, 2007
- ³⁹ Andersson and Ekman, 2009

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