

Russia's foreign relations and the Baltic Sea region

Some recommendations for policy-makers

By Sergey Kulik

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By Sergey Kulik, Institute of Contemporary Development (Moscow, Russia)



Dr. Sergey Kulik is director for international studies at the Institute of Contemporary Development, Endowment – the Russian independent think-tank. He leads and participates in projects covering different dimensions of the Russia' foreign policies and foreign economic policies. He focuses on Russia's relations with the European Union and their global and regional impacts.

Contact: kulik@riocenter.ru

Summary

Clear signs of a no return to the previous positive levels of the Russian-EU interactions are coming closer on the horizon. This presents a significant challenge for politicians as well as experts, if time presses, in defining new basic Russian approaches in the Baltic Sea region (BSR). Appropriate efforts for the BSR would not ignore maintaining a prolonged negative or very cautious approach of all of the adjacent states on the Russian track. The security defiance would stay in the top list, moving to higher levels in case of further rapprochement of Finland and Sweden with NATO, even short of a membership. In order to avoid stamping objectionable provisions on strategic preferences of both sides, it is necessary to at least smoothen the tensions with a speeding-up schedule. Additionally, no less important, the package for finding a light at the end of the tunnel in the BSR as well as with the EU must not be limited with the traditional security problems. It'd be much better to involve other categories of joint challenges and threats – starting from those for ecosystems and cyber-security to a number of those which are in contradiction with plans for domestic development both in Russia, its adjacent regions and Russian neighbors. In finding compromises for meeting these challenges, the regional mechanisms with the Russian active participation, including the Council of the Baltic Sea States, should be given a second wind.

Keywords

Baltic Sea Region, Russia, European Union, NATO, security, cyber-security, Eurasian Economic Union, Council of the Baltic Sea States, Barents-Euro Arctic Council, Arctic Council, Northern Dimension

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1. Introduction

In evaluating the Russian policies in the Baltic Sea region (BSR) expert preferences have traditionally put an emphasis on bilateral relationships with the countries of the region. Nevertheless, they have underestimated the channels between Moscow and the EU's headquarters in Brussels applicable to the Moscow's actions in the region. References to the EU are usually presented in the context of energy supplies and nowadays of sanctions and counter-sanctions. For a more comprehensive view of the Russian priorities and behavior in the BSR, there is a need to read them attentively through the lens of the relationships with Brussels.

A large number of opportunities and failures in cooperation with Russia in the BSR are directly or indirectly dependent on the overall vision of prospects on the EU track. In turn, the voices from capitals of the regional member states could have a more significant impact on the Brussels decisions. These realities are closely taken into account by Moscow in developing its stance in a more and more complicated region.

In the current situation, clear signs of impossible return to the previous positive levels of the Russian-EU interactions are coming closer on our horizon. The present reality with unprecedented tangle of challenges and mutual accusations of abrogating the developed code of rules principally differs from the pace of the last decades of our history.

This presents a significant challenge for politicians and experts in defining new basic Russian approaches in the BSR in case of the demand appeared from the Kremlin. It also reflects the need for an interdisciplinary basis of expertise. It shows to a possible departing from the current priorities focusing on the most pressing problems in the domain of the traditional security challenges of a conflict and military-political character. The package for finding a light at the end of the tunnel in the BSR as well as with the EU should include other categories of joint challenges and threats – starting from those for ecosystems to a number of those which contradict interests in domestic developments both in Russia and its neighbors.

In the BSR different areas of interests ranging from security to citizen-to-citizen cooperation are linked even more closely than in many other regions. This places a specific burden both for Russia and the EU in formulating prolonged policies in the region.

2. On the wave of shifts

Russia has always kept off developing its coherent policy in the Baltic Sea region. Well-grounded explanations of the Russian multi-speed and bilateral preferences for cooperation with the neighbors can be found in the official position papers, including Foreign Policy Concepts since 2000.

With the adoption of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), European partners initiated a signal to the Kremlin about a timely formulating its own overall regional strategy. Later these efforts have lost their energy, though rested on a logical basis. Since the 2004 enlargement, Russia has found itself in the BSR fully surrounded by the members of the European Union. This, coupled with the EU's coherent macro-regional strategy, could have given a food for thoughts about changes in the traditional multi-vector approach.

Nevertheless, Moscow has kept a lack of enthusiasm to offer an integrated "Baltic Strategy"; though the EU has been throwing more and more shadow on the Russia's settled dialogues with other states in the Baltics. This, in turn, is based on its own logic and still reflects a vision of mosaic of interests and priorities vis-à-vis every EU member or groups of members in the region.

In a very schematic framework, these groups for Russia's relations in the BSR could be separated into the Eastern Baltics (the Baltic States), the Northern Baltic (Finland and Sweden) and the Western Baltics (Poland, Denmark and Germany). Levels of bilateral cooperation have left the imprint on the Russia-EU channels. Until recently, relations with Germany and Finland have positively contributed to these channels and to joint efforts and projects in the BSR. Tougher disagreements with many other adjacent countries have usually served a drag on the dialogue between Moscow and Brussels.

With all pro and cons, with all the difficulties and challenges for Russia's activities before the Ukrainian conflict, the BSR was perceived as the "island of stability" on the European continent by all the regional states. However, in the emerged new and uncomfortable environment, the inertia of the traditional multi-speed policy in the region is still under momentum, though dynamically extinguishing.

High waves of the conflict on the Russian Western and Baltic coasts are fraught with hastening shifts from the past steady interconnections in the BSR – for every side of the border. They have already been more pronounced, but potentially could lead to an unusual rout with changing driving rules. On a weather worn road, these rules could present new uncertainties and unpleasant surprises.

One of the key stimuli for a prolonged dull weather seems to stem from the dynamically changing security landscape in Europe and in the region. That is filled with supplementing long-term decisions about a motion of relations between Russia and its neighbors in the region and prevailing moods in Moscow, Brussels (both EU and NATO) and the capitals in other BSR states.

3. Changing security landscape

In the Russian official documents, security has always been the leading factor for lining up relations with the adjacent states. The membership of many in NATO has always had a blazing stamp on Moscow's dialogues with them. The neutral status of Finland and Sweden has traditionally supported more favorable environment, though with prolonged different approaches to each of them.

However, positive drops of the temperature in the Russia-NATO channels impacted on Moscow's behavior in the region. Due to the turmoil from the "Arab spring" and the direct Alliance's involvement in Libya, the negative assessment of NATO was in the speedy process of reevaluation to a warmer vision. The Russia-NATO summit at the end of 2010 and the new NATO strategy indicated brighter perspectives.

This short period bore sign of lessening NATO's shadow over structuring Russia's preferences for the BSR. It helped to clear a way for more ambitious agendas with the EU and its member states. By this way Russian national security concerns did present, but within a different, non-military, framework. They have still embraced the Eastern Partnership (initially driven by Poland and Sweden) and EU's activism on the post-Soviet space with their Moscow's perceptions.

Nonetheless, some rifts did not seriously hamper cooperation. Moreover, it entered new heights and, quite importantly, provided new chains with the Russian strategic plans for social and economic development of the Northern-Western federal region.

Now Moscow faces at least four simultaneous formidable challenges in the security domain. Their combination could lead to formulation of a rather coherent Russian policy in the region, finding itself in for this once more unkind and integrated policy of all its neighbors.

First, the BSR has met unprecedented uneasy security environment after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Military redeployments with the US contingents as well as the Russian activities along the borders have thrown out a hint about hardly possible reverses at least in the nearest future. This energy has already led to a phase where specialists in risk-management are more in demand than other security experts. Overall, the trend has put a serious pressure on decision-makers of both sides confronting dilemmas about keeping their foot on or off the pedal. But Moscow officials seem to understand that even the latter option would not guarantee a turn to a steady positive attitude from all of its neighbors.

Second, this option is much harder to accept because NATO's shadow is back on the speedy expansion in the Baltics. It is further complicated with the de-facto frozen channels with Russia. In addition, divisions have encompassed new serious threats, like from the cyber space. Like with military deployments, Russia has to deal with the situation of a wider support of the Alliance from all the adjacent countries in the region.

The third challenge, which deserves special attention and causes a very acute Moscow headache, lies in the current and possible enhanced cooperation of Finland and Sweden with NATO, in the regional military formats,

through bilateral channels with the US and other countries and with each other. It seems that the process for military rapprochement with the Alliance even without a membership is of a very serious Russian concern. A specific high sensitivity is driven by political-psychological uneasiness.

It should be noted that military deployments in the Baltic republics, though with new undesirable risks, are at least psychologically more adaptable for Russia due to a long and complicated history and experience of the relations with NATO. Enhanced cooperation of the traditionally neutral states and Finland in particular drives to a principally different environment in the region through the Russian lens. The continuation of this process would contribute to further transformation in Russia approach for the whole region and to noticeable changes in policy planning for the BSR. This challenge could be more sensitive with potential serious changes on the Russian-Finnish track. Finland has occupied a special niche in formulating Russia's plans for the BSR.

Finally, Russia's relations with the EU have been traditionally concentrated on non-military problems and opportunities. With the obvious trend on securitization of the EU's policy towards Russia, this long-standing approach is under a big question for the foreseeable future.

Along with Finland and Sweden, the securitization of the EU policy and its rapprochement with NATO have drastically risen concerns in Moscow. They present a shrinking room for maneuver in striking compromise deals both in the non-military landscape and in the BSR. The securitization of the EU's preferences does not provide chances for restoring relations with Brussels and local governments in the BSR. This, again, could give a signal to assess possibilities for a less diversified Russian policy in the region.

To reverse the situation dialogues with NATO, the EU, Finland, Sweden and other countries in the region is necessary. However, so far the more immediate task is to reduce risks of conflict in the region. Emerging accidents and miscalculations are fraught with unpredictable consequences. Again, the heat indicates that the policy-makers should rely more on military experts, on military-to-military and military-to-diplomatic channels rather than on other categories of experts on security.

Besides military activities and further deployments, the security concerns for the region lie in the speed-up of negative trends in the cyber-space. Unfortunately, the abovementioned activities and deployments have overshadowed the emerging threats from cyber-space and a-must of deeper dialogues. These threats indicate to possible conflicts, besides the malfunction of Internet.

The BSR states can contribute at least to lessening the rising degree of miscalculations. There is a need for stronger joint assistance for the OSCE dealing with developing the code of confidence-building measures in cyber-space. These states have high voice in the Organization.

In addition, with the experience of many among them it would be useful to participate in other international forums, including those under the aegis of the UN, which work on these norms in the cyber domain on a global scale.

If to make smaller steps, one could think closely about the prospects of agreements with Russia for securing the critically important infrastructures (like nuclear stations) against cyber-attacks. The agreements in vain of what Moscow has signed with the US or China.

With the Russian interest to neutralize threats for cyber space and the same approach of some Baltic states, any practical compromises in this security sphere would have a serious positive imprint on the overall dialogue in the BSR. On the other side, any blocking initiative from any country in the region on cyber cooperation would influence other areas of cooperation.

4. Russia-EU transformations

Following the 2004 enlargement in the joint Russia-EU approaches the BSR gradually worked its way into new agreements on the creation of common spaces (economic; freedom, security and justice; external security; research and education, including cultural aspects). Moscow's approaches relevant for the Baltic region were oriented on these 'roadmaps' as well as on stimulating channels with Brussels. Since the beginning of the

century, official Russian preferences in the BSR were more and more clearly envisioned through relations with the European Union, though under the shadow of NATO.

Challenges from the securitization of the EU policy, sanctions regimes, and the pace of the Ukrainian conflict along with other sharp disturbances for the relations with Russia would pressure on the channels between Moscow and Brussels with direct impacts on the BSR. In assessing prospects of the dialogue with the EU, Moscow pays close attention to higher political signals from almost all BSR states to Brussels about the need for a tougher policy towards Russia. In turn, these signals have been already fixed in the EU's strategic documents what limits a room for maneuver for both Kremlin and Brussels, even for smoothening the current discrepancies ("Global Strategy", EU's five principles, foreign trade's "Trade for All", etc.). At the same time, these documents prefer often rather vague formula what provides flexibilities and a space for opportunities.

In the forthcoming efforts to stimuli dialogues with the EU and its member-states in the BSR, the specific recognition of transnational threats and new risks could serve as one of the drivers for cooperation to counteract them. The ones in the Russia's list applicable to the Baltic region are environmental and sanitary-epidemiological challenges, climate change, anti-terrorist cooperation, etc. In other words, the list of global and regional non-traditional threats – in contrast to traditional threats from the conflict and military-political domain (due to its novelty international terrorism is widely accepted as the non-traditional threat).

At the same time, one of the key barriers for cooperation in the BSR lies in the overpressure of political and security factors on trade and economic plans. In the Russia-EU relations, the latter contributed to solve or put off many concerns, like claims about democracy and human rights in Russia or EU activities in the post-Soviet space. Now it seems that this potential has been weakening.

Moreover, the current deadlocks have invited Moscow to make long-term decisions on a speed-up lessening dependence on the EU and its members-states in the BSR. This corresponds with such inclinations in the EU, on the energy track in particular. The Ukrainian conflict has made a substantial impact on the preferences in Brussels and many EU's capitals about a dynamic turn to a common energy policy and integration of the internal energy market – one of the few remaining diffused markets in the Union.

As for Russia, it is in the process of important decisions to accelerate the modernization and enlargement of the seaport infrastructure on its Baltic shore. This correlates with some difficulties in similar projects on the Black sea: replacement of the Ukrainian ports with Russian infrastructure has met certain shortcomings. Thus, the priority stake has made on the Baltics and the main challenge seems to be limited by financial resources to implement decisions rather quickly and adequately.

These ambitions would touch upon the Baltic states with their high interest in cooperation with Russia here. Nevertheless, they should be prepared for a no-return approach prevailing in Moscow. Moscow would present different answers to at least two prolonged questions: about acceptable niches for Russian external partners and how to create appropriate conditions for clients in increasing transit potential.

The same plans have already involved agricultural track. It seems that even without sanctions and with revitalization of dialogues with the BSR states, the trade with this category of products would be in a sustainable downturn trend. Sanctions and counter-sanctions have led to a wide-scale financial resources in this sector of the Russian economy. The mechanism has its own speed and inertia making any hopes for coming back to previous situation with the adjacent countries hardly possible.

These turns, among others, remind that it is time to refresh the assessments of the common interests left for both sides with its application to the BSR. Additionally, it is the right time for policy-makers and experts to recognize a new reality for the nearest future and to think about new patterns and non-trivial approaches to deal with this reality.

It should be reminded that Moscow still places high bets on improving cooperation with the EU. An ambitious agenda for establishing an integrated economic and humanitarian space from Lisbon to Vladivostok has not been removed from a possible negotiation table. Within this space, the BSR is perceived as an important part. However, unfortunately this idea is not valid so far for Brussels.

Nevertheless, it does not preclude energetic experts' efforts to calculate all pros and cons as well as to present scenarios for implementing the appeal in one form or another. This would at least serve as a signal to political echelons about searching for the light at the end of the tunnel.

It would be useful from the EU's side to pay closer attention at least to start an adequate dialogue about constructing bridges with the Eurasian Economic Union. This would encourage the Kremlin to be more cooperative in other areas and in the BSR. It is also useful to put at the higher levels of experts' priorities the unbiased analysis of cooperation between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union.

However, the lack of enthusiasm about these two tracks for discussions is still in the air. It impacts and would impact on Moscow's energies for a new climate in the BSR as well.

For assessments about Russian intentions in the BSR, the former interactions between Russia-EU agenda in the BSR and the internal strategic programs in Russia should not be ignored. For example, this agenda was closely linked with the development and implementation of strategic documents and plans for the Northern-Western federal district (NWFD). Moscow sufficiently specified its aims, objectives and priorities for engagement with the EU relevant both for domestic programs and interactions in the BSR in the Strategy for Innovation Development, in the Partnership for Modernization and the profile Russia-EU dialogues. However, many of them have left in the sleeping regime waiting for appropriate times with other lost their timeliness forever.

Due to sanctions' regimes and economic difficulties, adopted plans both regional and nation-wide have gained more declaratory character without any clear planning horizon. This adds to a challenge for efforts to find a common ground of interests in the region in the new reality.

But, again, these efforts should be made more energetically, also oriented on future opportunities. These documents, nevertheless, still provide a useful background for analyzing Russia's interests in the BSR. The Strategy for the NWFD listed several guidelines for actions, including cooperation with the BSR and the EU: low level of infrastructure; insufficient growth in the services sector; disproportionate presence of the natural resource and the military-industrial sectors; deficit of investments; poor quality and dilapidation of road infrastructure; increasing human impact on ecosystems; slowing of the propagation of nature and recovery of renewal natural resources. The list was developed before the Ukrainian conflict, but the strategic concerns and tasks for their removal have not disappeared.

Therefore, it is useful to continue analytical efforts in new realities. For example, sooner or later Russia could be more interested in green technologies and renewable energy. In this area, some of the BSR states have accumulated a high expertise and innovative potential. Moscow in its interest could find a dilemma to put more eggs in the basket of China, which is quite successful in these technologies or to boost cooperation with the EU.

In these efforts for Russia in view of the serious upheavals on the energy markets and of intentions to lessen dependency on the EU in some economic sectors, it is more actual to start finding new domains of cooperation in the BSR and the EU beyond the sanctions. However, such possibility is still mainly not seen on the horizon.

It should be added that a short experience of "turning to the East", i.e. to China, in trade and economic cooperation has offered Moscow substantial obstacles and shortcomings for at least making closer a gap between hopes and realities. This has been indicated in the above-mentioned remaining of the proposal about the integrated space between Lisbon and Vladivostok on the table.

On their side, the BSR countries should more attentively monitor the Russian "turn to the East" with more involvements of other Asian-Pacific states besides China, including non-commodity sectors. This monitoring is already in the sight of Brussels.

5. Cooperation mechanisms

One of the important issues in the agenda for Russia's cooperation in the BSR seems to be in the future of the regional mechanisms. There are at least two trends, which should be mentioned in this respect.

Firstly, the energy of these mechanisms has been weakened after the emergence of the Ukrainian crises. This is unfortunate in particular as the positive dynamics of the cooperation structures with the Russian participation were traditionally ahead of any other regions of the EU. The baggage of experience and the scope of joint projects is still overweight other regions as well.

Hence, the challenge for experts' efforts lies in the dilemma of how to give a new breath to these mechanisms and to deal with the uncomfortable overall political environment. This is more relevant due to a still high interest in Moscow to revitalize some of the mechanisms.

Secondly, the application of the regional mechanisms have been recently more oriented on the Arctic and the Barents Sea. The current turmoil has invited to more dynamic discussions about cooperation in the areas further in the North from the BSR with the participation of the countries of the region and the EU as well. The challenges for the BSR are obviously left behind these priorities.

In assessing cooperation mechanisms and structures in the Baltic region in the past and in the new environment, Moscow still often prefers to use the term "Northern Europe". This is no coincidence: Russia sees its interests and the role in ensuring stability in Northern Europe on the whole. Currently, maintaining cooperation in the Arctic-Barents is seen as a more fruitful area of consultations and for the regional mechanisms.

The fundamental architecture for cooperation is still considered by Moscow to comprise the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Barents-Euro Arctic Council (BEAC) and the Arctic Council (AC). The Northern Dimension (ND) keeps its place in the priorities' list, having a significant role (with a certain weakening of the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM)). Other specialized organizations, unions and associations, using official language, "complement" the work of these mechanisms.

Within the region, the highest potential is still held by the CBSS. Under its umbrella, a number of Russian regions have continued to engage with other mechanisms while trying to avoid redundancies in their activities.

For Russia the important role of the CBSS would remain. Despite criticism, the Council has appeared to be a significant platform for addressing and resolving the region's problems and for planning activities with the Russian participation. In addition, the Council has had a positive impact on bilateral relations between Russia and other BSR countries. However, the current situation does not provide effective instruments to this structure.

BEAC with the participation of Russia, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and the EU has a potential for a positive impact on the situation in the BSR, though dealing with outside problems. It could keep on a high-level mutual interests in cooperation in ecology standards, innovation endeavors, transport and logistics projects as well as countering global threats, like climate change. It provides an important channel for cross-border contacts, cultural and tourist exchanges.

The Barents Sea area has not been affected so seriously by the present turbulences in Europe and the BSR. The agenda for cooperation here is less politicized. Thus, it could provide opportunities to continue Russian dialogues with the participant states from the region.

One of the successful and appealing regional projects for Russia has been the Northern Dimension. Before the Ukrainian crisis, Moscow started to perceive it as a sort of testing grounds for the long-term and mutually beneficial cooperation on equal footing with the European Union in addition to the existing Russia-EU mechanisms and agreements. The ND was also considered as a regional application of efforts to create four Russia-EU common spaces. This substantially increased the clout of the project.

The experience with the ND has shown possibilities for engaging mechanisms of bilateral relations with individual countries in negotiations between Moscow and Brussels. Additionally, the zone of the ND is much broader than the BSR. Moscow and its partners, like Iceland, pay more attention to the Arctic region.

Furthermore, the ND encompasses a number of areas for cooperation – environment, nuclear security, energy, health care, transport, logistics, trade and investments, science, education, culture, etc. Despite of the present difficulties, there is more interest to continue joint efforts in the above areas.

The project-oriented approach, which at the start of the current decade, has been clearer emphasized by Moscow for the region, reflected a drive to move past general discussion in the regional “institutional overburden” toward more earthly and feasible cooperation programs.

Nowadays, the task for stimulating these structures in the uncomfortable environment is substantially complicated. They are victims of “high politics”, though traditionally being oriented on local and specific problems of the region. Thus, at least for the nearest future they are destined to operate under uneasy relations between Russia and the EU.

At the same time, one could try to identify important areas of engagement. This would require permanent joint efforts in the list of long-standing problems, like ecological security in the Baltic and the Arctic.

There are voices for supporting of broader agendas for these mechanisms. However, these voices can be heard from expert communities and not from decision-makers. In this situation, it would be more useful to stimulate discussions in such forums like CBSS about more project-oriented or rather specific problems, which have more potential for compromises. In Moscow, for example, there is an interest to boost private-public partnerships what lies in the vain of initiatives within the CBSS before the conflict.

6. Cross-border interconnections

Cross-border interconnections have always been in the forefront of the Russian-EU cooperation in the BSR. It is less affected by political turmoil and plays a significant role in developing relations between Russia and the adjacent states. These connections are oriented on resolving specific problems even with substantial political divisions.

The European Union has always paid particular attention to the Russian track for cross-border cooperation on the BSR, frequently more than Moscow. Six Russian regions are in the zone of ND. Certain areas of official contacts among local government bodies have intersected with cooperation programs of the CBSS, ND, HELCOM and others.

It would be beneficial to use these mechanisms (along with other levels – partner regions, euro-regions, partner cities, separate projects between official bodies, NGOs, etc.) to revive strengthening cooperation and trust at the local level. Russia’s real readiness to expand the participation of its provinces could be one of the main indicators in assessing the desire to improve the situation in the BSR. Horizontal ties between provinces serve as a powerful generator of good neighborly relations and trust in the region.

Humanitarian cooperation has its limits for influencing the political uneasy environment. Nevertheless, it has a substantial potential to bring positive impulses and to involve a large-scale citizens’ activities for the sake of normalization of the situation.

Considering this, it is necessary to expand expert-to-expert contacts, to enlarge cultural chains, including mutual presence of theater, exhibitions and other projects in the BSR arena. Such contacts are of a particular significance for positive trends.

It should be noted that all regional programs with the Russian participation are in the working condition, though with decrease of the financial support from both the EU and Russia. This decrease is quite sensitive for scientific and educational joint endeavors.

Again, cross-border cooperation in the BSR is of great importance to Russia and to its neighbors as well. It touches upon inter alia the cooperation of small- and medium-sized businesses, the introduction in Russia the implementation of the best-practices projects in the NWFD and other Russian districts, the support for cluster and innovation initiatives in Russia.

In this respect, one of the key tasks of inhabitants of the BSR is to maintain at least the current level of cross-border cooperation. Interactions objectively would remain a resource to provide workable relationships in a number of areas and an important toll to smoothen the problems between Russia and its neighbors in the BSR and the EU as well.

The “bottom-up mobilization” is required: the energy from the business-to-business contacts, from local authorities and non-commercial structures could play an important role on the way to stabilization in the BSR and give a signal to decision-makers to avoid at least prompt resolutions of a rather unpleasant nature. This signal would be enhanced by further Russian participation in the cooperation formats, like “Interreg Baltic Sea Region” or by continuation of sharing finance burdens for regional projects, including the ND.

7. Conclusions

There are much more probabilities for a prolonged period of sanctions intact or just changed in one way or another. In addition, on the wave of the Ukrainian conflict Russia would be still in the situation of more coherent and cautious attitudes from governments and major portions of citizens of all the adjacent states of the BSR. This new reality would tackle further difficulties for decision-makers.

Nevertheless, policy-makers should escape from abrasively acute assessing and reacting to trends and events in the Baltic Sea region. There is a need for certain changes in approaches for the region, but they would be more adequate with an assuagement of mutual concerns. Both sides must not brace themselves with moves to a more brittle environment and should bring them down to less tense levels.

In the security domain, a substantial impact on prolonged decisions in Moscow would be made by dynamic boosting cooperation of Finland and Sweden with NATO and its members. At least a slowing down of this process could be a very positive signal for backing away from the present deadlocks.

It should be reminded that Moscow still places high bets on improving cooperation with the EU. Decision-makers should bring a strong impetus on experts’ communities to mutually and deeply analyze all pros and cons of boosting interactions as well as areas of no return in economic, trade and other domains. This refers to prospects of cooperation between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union – what would touch upon the BSR.

The specific recognition of transnational threats and new risks could serve as one of the drivers for cooperation to counteract them. The ones in the Russia’s list applicable to the Baltic region are environmental and sanitary-epidemiological challenges, climate change, anti-terrorist cooperation, cyber-security, etc. Decision-makers of both sides should have a more balanced view about prospects of cooperation in the region by looking more closely at the list of global and regional non-traditional common threats (besides counter-terrorism), rather than to concentrate mainly on traditional threats from the conflict and military-political domain. Rising joint vulnerabilities are not a monopoly of the latter.

The regional mechanisms with the Russian participation have made a substantial contribution in ensuring the remaining of the BSR as the “island of stability”. If revitalized to reverse the present trends they would be useful instruments in the tool for repair bridges between Moscow and Brussels, Moscow and the capitals of the adjacent states. In this vain it is time to stimulate discussions in such forums like CBSS about more project-oriented or rather specific tasks, including the development of public-private partnerships. These tasks have a high potential for striking deals in other areas.

The ND is still the important tool for both sides to keep the dialogue. This project should be continued with a particular care by official structures.

Overall, the geography of the present priorities of the regional mechanisms should be more balanced and slightly be moved southwards – from the Arctic to the Baltic Sea. This should not be overlooked by decision-makers.

For the cross-border cooperation, both sides should keep afloat mechanisms and channels for interactions. On the Russian side, it would be appropriate to accelerate the process to adopt the Federal Law about the cross-border cooperation of the Russian Federation – the process de-facto frozen since 2010. This law would play an important role for cooperation in the BSR in particular and its adoption would be a good signal for further efforts to improve the situation in the region.



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