Baltic-Nordic Regionalism

A History of Regional Cooperation and Reconfiguration

International research seminar at Institute of Advanced Studies, University College London

10.06.2016

During the 20th century, the regional concept of Norden – signifying the Scandinavian countries including Finland, but traditionally excluding the Baltic countries – acquired a meaning beyond the merely geographical, as a political and historical entity in and by itself. As such, it has also become to denote specific ways of organizing society and certain forms of lifestyle which have recently been appropriated by both Baltic and Nordic governments as a possible supranational brand for promoting a new Baltic-Nordic “regionness” as well as emphasising global competitiveness of the Baltic Sea Region in view of growing geopolitical tensions and economic recession.

However, it is rarely self-evident what it means to be “Nordic”. The region’s borders to the Baltic or the Arctic have been fluid and remain under negotiation even today. Similarly, the identity discourse about “Nordicness” is still characterised by uncertainty over whether Norden is as an open and – in this sense – civilizational idea, or a culturally and geographically limited one.

The aim of our network is to investigate previously understudied or ignored competing geographical and regional ideas, identities, and projects which have in various ways challenged or presented alternatives to the presently ‘natural’ Nordic identity. The seminar is meant to showcase research in progress and to facilitate further network-building.

The venue of the seminar is in the Common Ground of the Institute of Advanced Studies in the South Wing (on the south side of UCL’s main quad). The seminar is organised by the departments of Scandinavian Studies (SELCS) and European Social and Political Studies at UCL.

It is supported by grants from Institute of Advanced Studies (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies), and CREDOC – Centre for Research into Dynamics of Civilization (www.ucl.ac.uk/research_frontiers/civilisation).
Program

09.30-10.00 – Welcome

10.00-10.30 – Jörg Hackmann (University of Greifswald/University of Szczecin): Changing semantics and political imaginations: Baltic space in the 19th and 20th centuries

10.30-11.00 – Pärtel Piirimäe (University of Tartu/Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study): The conceptualization of the Baltic region: Transformative moments in history

11.00-11.30 – Coffee break

11.30-12.00 – Marta Grzechnik (University of Gdańsk/University of Greifswald): Poland and the Baltic-Nordic regionalism in the twentieth century

12.00-12.30 – Ainur Elmgren (University of Helsinki): The rise and fall of ‘Baltoscandia’ in Tulenkantajat – Transnational cultural radicalism in 1930s Finland


13.00-14.00 – Lunch break

14.00-14.30 – David Edwards (University of Glasgow): Nordic, Baltic or both: How do Estonians position themselves regionally?

14.30-15.30 – Carl Marklund (Södertörn University): Hybrid geopolitics in the Baltic-Nordic region [presentation and roundtable discussion]

15.30-17.00 – Wine reception
Abstracts

Jörg Hackmann (University of Greifswald/University of Szczecin): Changing semantics and political imaginations: Baltic space in the 19th and 20th centuries

In public discourses since the early 19th century, the term “Baltic” has changed its meaning from a mere geographical one based on natural space to several in a broad sense geopolitical notions. The first aim of the presentation is to line out major trajectories of the changing semantics of “Baltic” in distinction to “Ostsee”. In a second part I try to explain these changes by looking at major political notions connected to the changing semantics of Baltic space. As such notions I identify power, peace, freedom and security. They are based on social, political or cultural constructions which are closely intertwined and refer in one way or another to the natural geography of Baltic space. As a result, it will be shown that a limitation of Baltic space to “Baltikum” or the “three Baltic states” competes with wider spatial notions connected to the Baltic Sea.

Pärtel Piirimäe (University of Tartu/ Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study): The conceptualization of the Baltic region: Transformative moments in history

In the conceptualization of the Baltic region a tension is created by the fact that its name is derived from the name of the sea, yet in the common usage it only signifies certain areas on its eastern shores. The lack of definitive physical boundaries has rendered the concept amorphous and opened it up to expansion and reinterpretation. In this process, historical, cultural and political factors have had precedence over the geographical ones. My presentation will focus on what I would call the “transformative moments”, i.e. the periods in history when the shifts in (geo)political landscape have put the inherited notion of the “Baltic” into question and prompted a search for alternative concepts, sometimes bringing about the transformation of the concept “Baltic” itself. I will also pay attention to the tension and interaction between the concepts “Baltic” and “Norden” and show that the reinterpretations suggested at the times of historical junctures were often aimed at the shifting or overcoming the boundaries between these two regions.

Marta Grzechnik (University of Gdańsk/University of Greifswald): Poland and the Baltic-Nordic regionalism in the twentieth century

Poland’s relations to the Baltic Sea and the Baltic and Scandinavian neighbours in the twentieth century was complicated. This complication was the result of a number of factors: firstly, both after the First and Second World Wars the access to the sea was expanded and, consequently, the relation to it had to be redefined. Secondly, on both occasions this expansion was strongly contested by Germany, the country on whose cost it happened. And thirdly, Poland had historically lacked maritime traditions and
identification with the sea, and the northern direction in the Polish conceptions of foreign policies had been underrepresented, from which followed rather weak relations with the northern neighbours. All this meant that Polish conceptualisations of the country’s place in the Baltic Sea region in the twentieth century were dictated on the one hand by passionate exhortations for developing maritime policy, building lasting contacts with the Baltic and Nordic neighbours and asserting Poland’s place in the region, and on the other security concerns, especially with German threat in mind. In some cases, these concerns turned out to be mutually exclusive, as when interest in Scandinavia and the Baltic States was almost completely abandoned in favour of warnings against German revisionism. In others, as in Józef Borowik’s idea of including the Baltic States and Poland into an expanded Nordic-Baltic region, or an increased interest in the Scandinavian countries in the 1960s, they could be combined. This paper will discuss this complicated interplay of factors throughout the twentieth century, placing Poland on the borderland of Baltic-Nordic regionalism.

Ainur Elmgren (University of Helsinki): The rise and fall of ‘Baltoscandia’ in Tulenkantajat – Transnational cultural radicalism in 1930s Finland

Tulenkantajat – The Fire Bearers – was a contested grouping of poets, artists and journalists with its origins in cultural movements of the youth in the interwar era in Finland. Despite an early split, the idea of a subversive and provocative “Tulenkantajat” spirit remained alive in the public discourse, but also in the more secretive language of the Finnish Secret Police. Thus the opinions of self-declared “Fire Bearers” received publicity and attention beyond the cultural sphere. A weekly magazine with the same name was published twice – first as an expensively printed cultural journal from 1928 to 1930, and next as a cheaply printed current issues magazine from 1933 to 1939. Except for a brief period in 1930, the editor was Erkki Vala (1902-1991), a young and ambitious journalist whose political edge was honed in the increasing struggles for freedom of expression in 1930s Finland. Already the first version of Tulenkantajat proposed to unite the “young nations of Europe”, but it was in the first issues of the second version that the Baltoscandian orientation was promoted. The magazine even promised to post a correspondent in Estonia.

As the cosmopolitan outlook of the 1920s fell into disrepute even among Vala’s former comrades, Vala continued to propose various regional and transnational identities as worthy of consideration to improve the national culture – but also to increase geopolitical security and to strengthen democracy. One of these proposed identities was “Baltoscandia” - but who would belong to it and on what grounds? Poland, for example, was rejected by Vala as too authoritarian in 1933. From a cautiously positive start in 1933-34, when Tulenkantajat published several articles on the subject (incl. an article by Estonian geographer Edgar Kant), the increasing political authoritarianism of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (as well as the clandestine involvement of Finnish militant nationalists in a coup attempt in Estonia, revealed in 1935) caused Vala to drop the concept “Baltoscandia” and increasingly promote a Western-Scandinavian orientation for Finland instead.
A troubling footnote to Vala’s early enthusiasm for the Baltic countries: In the last years of the Second World War, in Swedish exile and after a prison stint for espionage on behalf of Britain, Vala penned a booklet promoting Soviet propaganda on the fate of the Baltic countries. Even though the booklet was published under a pen name, the Swedish authorities were well aware of the identity of the author. Vala never had to face any consequences for this booklet, but was able to return to Finland.

**Kaarel Piirimäe** (University of Tartu/Estonian War Museum): Conviction or political rhetoric? Regionalist ideas and the beginning of Estonian diplomacy, 1988–1991

In November 1988 the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic declared its sovereignty within the Soviet Union. In April 1990 Estonia announced the start of the transition to full independence from the Soviet Union, a process that ended in August 1991 when the international community recognised the Republic of Estonia as an independent state. The period from 1988 to 1991 was marked by increasingly active proto-diplomatic activities to gain the attention and recognition for Estonian aspirations on the international stage. Not surprisingly, Estonian activists used the language of regionalism and geopolitics in their political rhetoric. The old *nomenklatura* of the Soviet republic was fond of the idea of the new Hanse and Estonia’s role as a bridge between the East and the West. In the wake of the revolution of 1989 in East-Central Europe, the incoming government of Edgar Savisaar raised the spectre of Estonia belonging naturally to Central Europe. By the second half of 1990 Central Europe was more or less replaced by the idea of a Northern-Eurasian geopolitical zone with Tallinn as the new Brussels in its centre. Several other ideas such as the nuclear-free Northern Europe, the Baltic region, etc. figured in Estonian diplomacy. The question that naturally arises is whether any of these ideas were carried by conviction or should they be treated merely as functions of political interests that were changing as international political context was changing also. This paper will scrutinize the ideas of some of the key actors, primarily foreign minister Lennart Meri and prime minister Edgar Savisaar, during the period.

**David Edwards** (University of Glasgow): Nordic, Baltic or both: How do Estonians position themselves regionally?

The purpose of this paper is to present an interpretivist exploration of the phenomenon of regionalism as understood by Estonians. The results of a series of interviews are presented in which Estonians were asked to position their country within a wider neighbourhood, in order not only that their regional identification can be articulated, but that the means of rationalisation can also be identified. The research, situated within the Social Constructivist branch of International Relations theory, explores the intersection between geopolitics and social identity theory, where groups or families of states are constructed and rationalised subjectively. Applied to the case study of Estonia, where regionality is contested and ideas of Nordic, Baltic,
Eastern and Post-Soviet come into contact, the rationalisations used to justify one regionalisation against another become ever clearer.

The interviews discovered that factors were deployed in subjective and occasionally contradictory ways. Themes such as Othering are used to position neighbours outside of region and rationalise boundaries, while historical, linguistic, economic, geopolitical and cultural identifiers were used to partially draw Others into the Self. The outcome is an interpretivist approach to region in which Estonia is positioned on a north-south continuum excluding Russia, where particularly close links to Finland are emphasised, and where Estonia is more widely positioned in both the Nordic and Baltic worlds. These results present a challenge to the concepts of homogeneous regionality, highlight the weaknesses of deductive or analytical approaches to regionality, and provide an argument whereby a state does not necessarily need to choose one or other identity, but rather can inhabit a plurality of regions and identify oneself as both of two apparently mutually exclusive regions.

**Carl Marklund** (Södertörn University): Hybrid geopolitics in the Baltic-Nordic region

After decades of near closure, the end of the Cold War presented a unique window of opportunity for regional cooperation around the Baltic Sea. Since 1989/1991, the Baltic-Nordic Region – i.e., the five Nordic countries and the three Baltic countries, including adjoining parts of Germany, Poland and Russia – has evolved into a laboratory for an explicitly non-geopolitical form of regionalism, conceived to defuse Cold War tensions. Geared towards “low” politics and “soft” security across a multitude of policy fields, this new regionalism above all aimed at moving “high” politics and “hard” geopolitics out of the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). In particular, the relative success of post-Cold War cooperation has established the region and its regional regime as a role model for EU regional cooperation elsewhere.

Today, however, the Baltic-Nordic region is witnessing a return of geopolitics. Growing uncertainty and new security dilemmas are primarily due to increasing EU-NATO-US-Russian tension in the wake of the recent Ukraine crisis rather than developments around the Baltic Sea. Yet, the narrative about the success story of post-Cold War BSR cooperation tends to obscure lingering East-West and North-South tensions within the region itself: Several regional issues may become objects of future contests, ranging from energy, environment and migration via human rights and transport safety to growing military and propaganda activities as well as security dilemmas. Possibly, geopolitics never fully disappeared from the region. It may have remained dormant, only to reawaken as endogenous as well as exogenous tensions arise anew, bringing the traditional understanding of security back in as a key factor for future BSR cooperation.

This raises the main question to be addressed in this presentation: How is the Baltic regional regime responding to the challenge of returning geopolitics in the region? How well positioned is contemporary BSR cooperation for absorbing resurgent security tension while safeguarding the institutions and narratives of Baltic new regionalism?
Expressed differently, what happens to new regionalism when the window of opportunity is closing down? Will it dissolve under the pressure of returning geopolitics? Or will it develop into “a new politics of space” in response to the reframing identities, interests and strategies of regional cooperation across the Baltic Sea Region, possibly evolving into a novel kind of hybrid geopolitics?